

Prayer

Lord God, forgive us for our failure to show love towards all.

Forgive us if we have been disrespectful of others or of You;

Forgive us for being lost in ourselves and forgetful of others;

Lift us up in repentance so we may draw close to You again;

Change us by Your Spirit, so that we choose to do Your will;

Lord God, You have the power to change our lives: Alleluia!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Health

Pray today for those who suffer from preventable diseases throughout the world, through lack of funding or because of poor government. Pray for Christian medical agencies.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for His presence each hour of the day
- Pray about birth control and its effects on people's spiritual life
- Pray for Aung San Sui Kyi, the opposition leader on trial in Burma

Meditation

Rejoice my soul, rejoice in Him

Who gives us all the gift of life and daily food;

And pours His love and grace on all for health and light.

Rejoice my soul, rejoice in Him

Who gives us family and friends, and fellowship;

And grants us an inheritance of faith and hope and love.

Rejoice my soul, rejoice in Him

Who gives us victory over death and sin and hell;

And makes us truly glad to know we possess eternal life.

Rejoice my soul, rejoice in Him

Who gives us entry to the presence of our God;

And builds us up in faith through daily joy and suffering.

Rejoice my soul, rejoice in Him

Who gives us genuine happiness, a spirit of joy;

And seals the future with His blood, and comes again in glory!

Bible Study - Ephesians 2:1-10

¹ You were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the ways of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit now at work in the children of disobedience, ³ and in which we all once lived in the passions of our earthly nature, following the desires of the body and mind; for by nature we were children of wrath, like everyone else.

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy because of the great love by which He has loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, has brought us to life together with Christ - by grace you have been saved - ⁶ and He has raised us up and seated us together with Christ Jesus in the heavenly places, ⁷ so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, ⁹ not by means of works lest anyone should boast, ¹⁰ for we are His craftsmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the good deeds God has previously prepared as the pathway in which we should walk.

Review

In this opening passage from Ephesians 2, Paul turned to speak directly to those who would read the letter. Remarkably, after saying 'grace to you and peace from God our Father ...' at the beginning of the letter (1:2), these are the first words addressed to the Ephesians with a specific message. It is clear enough, calling on the Ephesians to recognise who they are 'in Christ', and live a life of good deeds worthy of their call. They used to be sinful (2:1-3), but have been saved by God's grace (2:4-7), not on the basis of their own 'good deeds', but on 'good deeds' directed by God (2:8-9).

This passage appears in most Bibles as one paragraph. This is probably correct from a literary point of view, however, it is much easier to see Paul's points if the reading is split into three 'mini' paragraphs, each containing one of Paul's long sentences. Despite this, it is easy to spot the theme of godly living, described as 'walking' in a manner worthy of Christ. Paul reminds the Ephesians of the old pagan ways 'in which you once walked' (2:2, see also 2:3), and ends with advice to walk in such a way as to do the 'good deeds' of God. In this way, Paul identifies the complete change in motivation that takes place in someone who is saved; without Christ, life is lived according to 'the passions of our earthly nature' (2:3) but with Christ, life is lived according to the pathway of good deeds 'God has previously prepared' (2:10). None of us can read this and avoid its challenge; are we really walking in those 'good deeds' God has prepared for us?

Paul may have written like this for a number of reasons. One of them is that in most of his letters, Paul had to explain that Gentile Christians were not required to live according to the laws (sometimes called 'good deeds') of Judaism. Wandering teachers attempted to instruct churches to accept the 'laws of Moses', so that once saved, a Christian should keep each and every traditional Jewish law. Paul strongly opposed these teachers (see Galatians 1:6f.). He was not opposed to doing good, but he preached that good deeds were the result of faith and the action of the Holy Spirit (see Gal. 5:22f.), not the result of personal striving. He fought this battle throughout his life, and we can hear echoes of it here, in verses 8 to 10.

If this battle taught Paul anything, it was this; the grace of God in salvation was the only motivation for the Christian life. The Ephesian church was of gentile origin not Jewish, and Paul knew the difference, so he spoke to them as people who lived in the Roman world of many religions, with every conceivable divinity; rulers, powers, darkness, hierarchy, dominions, gods, princes. When these words appear in the New Testament as they do here in verse 2, they do not define any structure of Satan's empires. Rather, they tell us that any and every description of divinity other than Jesus Christ is false. All of them lead away from the one true God, and those who follow them do little more than follow their own natural desires; Paul declared that the Christian has been saved from all this, and it remains true, even today.

Yet this whole passage gave Paul an opportunity to explain the Gospel of salvation again (2:4-7). Paul had already said much about the Gospel in his prayer of thanks to God (1:4-7), but here, he summed it up in one of the most memorable phrases in the whole of Ephesians; 'by grace you have been saved' (2:5). Paul added this comment as an afterthought to his explanation of the life brought to us by the love of Christ (2:4). However, he returned to it, and extended it in verse 8; 'by grace you have been saved through faith' (2:8)! Paul sought to explain the transformation of the soul from works of worldly sin (2:1-3) to works of godliness (2:10), but he was still enwrapped with a spirit of praise for the 'grace of God', which is the extraordinary mercy and blessing of God found through salvation in Christ.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with a further discussion of these subjects:

- What can we learn from 2:1-3 about the 'pre-Christian' life?
- What does 2:4-7 add to our knowledge of God's salvation in Christ?
- How may we know we are walking in the pathways of God (2:8-10)?

Notes on the text and translation

- V2** *'in which you once walked'* The Greek word used here means 'to walk, go about, live or conduct oneself'. Some translations prefer 'lived' because it sharpens up the meaning of the phrase, however, the next verse begins in a similar way but with a different Greek word for 'lived', so it is best to keep a contrast between this verse and the next (see study) by saying 'walked' in this verse. English usually uses 'walked' synonymously with 'lived'.
- V2** *'in the children of disobedience'* The authorised version translated 'sons of disobedience', and many modern versions simply say 'those who are disobedient'. I have kept Paul's rather dramatic phrase because it is meant to have impact, but suggest that the Greek for 'sons' has no particular implication for male rather than female (which is generally true in the New Testament) giving 'children of disobedience'.
- V5** *'has brought us to life together with Christ'* This translation comes from a strange Greek word used by Paul that combines the three ideas of 'life', 'being made', and 'together with'. It is a unique

word created to explain the resurrection. Other Bible versions typically translate this as 'made us alive together with Christ' (see NRSV)

- V6** *'and He has raised us up and seated us together with Christ Jesus ...'* A translation that follows the Greek exactly would say 'and raised us up with and seated us with in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus'. This is rather difficult to comprehend. What I have done is a little technical, but quite logical, and this is to assume that the sentence structure in verse 6 follows on directly from verse 5 (which is clearly what Paul had in mind), and simplify the sentence construction so that it reads clearly in English.
- V9** *'... as the pathway in which we should walk'*. This famous verse ends with some bad grammar from Paul! Nevertheless, we have to make sense of what he wrote, which is translated literally like this 'which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them' (see A.V.). The last phrase is important because it links back to the beginning of our passage (see study) which refers to our 'walk' or way of life (2:1,2). I have made the connection between the 'good works' of the previous phrase and the 'way in which we should walk' by using the word 'pathway' instead of the Greek 'in them'.

Going Deeper

What can we learn from 2:1-3 about the 'pre-Christian' life?

In verses 1 to 3, Paul speaks about the pre-Christian life in a highly negative manner; 'dead in trespasses and sins', 'following the prince of the air ...', 'children of disobedience'. In order to understand what Paul is saying here, we must look at the whole paragraph, and in some Bible translations the flow of the text has unfortunately been lost because of aggressive editing. To begin with, you may wonder why verse 2 begins in the middle of a sentence. This is because verses 2 and 3 both begin with the words 'in which ...'; each verse follows on from verse 1, and each with its own point.

Verse 2 speaks about the multiplicity of gods, authorities and rulers believed in by people of the first century AD. There was little escape from this. People lived in a world that felt very dangerous and virtually everyone believed that the gods controlled everything. The radical secular option to believe in no god at all, did not exist as it does today. People's lives were enwrapped with various beliefs about how their own lives were affected by the activities of the gods and most people lived according to systems designed to appease the gods.

In verse 3, Paul goes further. Having addressed the Gentiles like this, he used the language of 'we' and included himself and his colleagues, many of them of Jewish origin, in the same condemnation; 'we all once lived in the passions of our earthly nature ... we were children of wrath, like everyone else' (2:3). Remarkably, Paul dared to suggest that God's people had also lost touch with God, and their purest motives had been lost (the pursuit of godliness according to the laws of Moses), given over to personal passions and desires. This was challenging talk. Yet it was no more than what Jesus said. He spoke of Pharisees who prayed on street corners to draw attention to themselves (Matt 6:5), and He was killed on the orders of the High Priest for the purest of Jewish motives (Mark 14:53)!

Paul's point is the same as that found in Romans 3:23: 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'. Some suggest that this is an insult to all people of good faith who have acted with altruism, from purely selfless motives, whatever their background. However, by including the Jews in his argument, people who had sought to live by the highest of God's standards, Paul sets us a challenge; what is altruism, and where can we find it?

The problem is this; we might look at the actions of good people and applaud them, but we are suspicious of those who put themselves forward to say 'we have acted selflessly'. Consequently, our observations are no guide to what truly motivates people to do good. Paul would say to us that the only truly good thing ever done for us is the selfless sacrifice of Christ, who has opened up for us a pathway back to our Creator, and eternal peace with Him. Moreover, the proof of this is not in what Jesus said, but in what He did for us, and its subsequent effect on real people.

What does 2:4-7 add to our knowledge of God's salvation in Christ?

So it is not surprising that Paul followed this analysis of the human condition by speaking about the solution found in Jesus Christ by the grace of God (2:4-7). Here is true goodness, Paul says, and it is found in God; 'God, who is rich in mercy because of the great love by which He has loved us ...' (2:4). It is worth remembering that Paul said these words before the New Testament existed, and with no other background than the Old Testament as God's Word and the example of the life of Christ. The Old Testament speaks of God love, but it is a love that was often rejected, and God responded with grief when He had to punish His people so that they could learn from the consequences of their sin. Yet in reading the Old Testament, many find it hard to pick out the 'God of love' from the 'God of wrath', however justified His anger!

Paul did not have this problem. He knew the Old Testament better than most of us, and he understood its intricate array of prophecies and wisdom pointing to the Messiah. He had seen these prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, not firsthand, but through the apostles and through a vision (see Galatians 1:13-2:21). Throughout his ministry, Paul preached the message about the Messiah, Jesus Christ; 'even when we were dead in our trespasses, He has brought us to life together with Christ!' (2:5 see also Romans 5 and 6). Paul's great summary of faith in the unique work of Christ is this 'by grace you have been saved' (2:5,8); these words speak of the riches of God's mercy made real in what Jesus has done for us on the Cross and through His resurrection. However, it does appear from the way that it is written (like an insert to the verse) that Paul thought of this phrase as he was writing!

The second paragraph has an overflowing sense of wonder and praise, a feature of the letter which is absent from the beginning of Ephesians 2 but returns in verse 4. Apart from the great words we have just discussed in verse 5, the main benefit of the paragraph is to be found in verses 5 and 6. In verse 5, Paul created an impressive Greek word (by putting together some standard elements of Greek) meaning 'to be made living together with', and in verse 6 he added two more complex words, meaning 'to raise up together with' and 'to be seated together with'. He used all these three words to describe the saving work of our generous God. The phrases do not stand out in English in the same way that they do in Greek, but I can assure you it is obvious in the original text. They tell us that Paul's message here is this; our salvation entails these three things, all of which are shared with Christ; being brought to life, being raised, and being seated in heaven!

Each of these three great promises are the consequence of God's grace and kindness 'to us in Christ Jesus' (2:7), but there are consequences and we cannot ignore them!

How may we know we are walking in the pathways of God (2:8-10)?

In the last paragraph, Paul begins with the theme of salvation following on from what he has just said, and continues by applying it to the main theme of the passage, which is the manner of life God's people should live, having been saved from a life of sin. This is the Christian alternative to the apparent and illusive goodness of both paganism and secularism; he describes goodness based not in humanity but in the God who made all things, both the earth and the people within it. It is interesting that Paul never discusses the origins of sin as described in Genesis 3, or tells us about how salvation overcomes this sin through the sacrifice of Christ. He is content to speak of God's free gift (2:8), and in an intellectual sense he hits the nail on the head when he says that 'it is the gift of God not by means of works lest anyone should boast ...' (2:9).

Paul knew that just as today, it is almost impossible to make a sound moral judgement about someone who says 'I have done something good' (see above), so he solves our intellectual problem and also the spiritual problem of human sin by saying that all 'good' comes from God. Goodness is 'previously prepared' for us, and our path of Christian discipleship is to walk 'in' these good deeds. We can never claim them as our own, but our calling is to do what is good, always.

Application

Unfortunately, the term 'good deeds' has become anathema to some within the church who have emphasised the Gospel message 'faith not works' to such an extent that the call of God to do good has been left almost to one side in the surge to evangelise. However, we must not forget this. In saving us, the intention of God is that we should be workers in His vineyard, sowers and reapers for the Kingdom of God. This is exactly what Paul means by his last sentence, saying that we are 'created in Christ Jesus (that is, as saved people) for the good deeds God has previously prepared as the pathway in which we should walk'. If we cannot do good of our own merit, this is how we do it!

The threefold challenge of this text is therefore clear. Leave behind all pretension that humanity can achieve pure moral goodness, honesty and integrity, and accept that these things are found in us by the grace of God. Now, we will naturally find that these things are found partially in all circumstances and in all kinds of people. However, if we believe that one God made the World and He is good, then all of this goodness comes from Him; and God gives of Himself graciously. He wants to bless the world despite the sin within it, and so we who have received His mercy and salvation are the means of His blessing to the world. We do not claim this goodness of ourselves, but what we do is by the grace and mercy of God, and by the power of His Spirit working within us.

The glory of our salvation is not ours to enjoy as some personal benefit from God so that we can have a good life. The glory of our salvation is that the Lord God has given us over to do His work, and in doing this, we claim not our own merits but those of the God who has saved us. To suggest otherwise is not the Gospel of Christ as found here in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. How do we set about doing what God has prepared for us to do? We ask Him. If we have truly yielded all to Him, He will not fail to let us know what we should do for Him. The Christian life is not rooted in worship service attendance and belonging to an organisation that does things that people have to 'opt into' (or try to get out of!). The Christian life is personal communion with God by which He commissions us for our work, and we celebrate this by sharing it with the body of

Christ, the church, in worship and service. The church exists to enable people to do God's work, not to control it.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what you mean by the word 'grace', particularly in the expression 'God's grace'.
2. How can God love the billions of people He has made individually with the same care for everyone?
3. Paul says that God has created us for good deeds (2:10). Share in your group; what good deeds has He made for you to do?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find it hard to go to some churches, where, as a visiting preacher, I find people who are frustrated as Christians because they are unable to feel that they have a role or a purpose within the life of the church. Even those who have plenty of jobs to do can often feel that they are not used to their potential and believe that God has something more for them; but they do not know how to go about doing it, either in the church or out of it. I must be careful in saying this, but some church structures specialise in restricting people's service of the Lord rather than enabling it, and we need godly leaders who can spot this and do away with such control. God's people need liberating, not controlling; this, certainly, is my prayer.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Write down a private list of those things which you believe to be sins which affect your own life. If you wish, you could share this exercise with someone you love, but there is value in doing it privately first of all, and sharing it later. Pray into each one accordingly, and confess your sins*
- *Pray for the life of your own church, and pray especially that it might be a means of liberating God's people to fruitful service, and the love of other people in the name of Christ Jesus.*

Final Prayer

Great Lord and Master of all Creation, we ask You to receive from us the prayers and the praise we offer each and every day of our lives. Fill us with a heart of worship so that nothing is too large or too small for us to bring to You in thanks, and be a reason for our praise. Great and Mighty Lord; we worship You: AMEN
