

A TRIP TO HEAVEN

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 2:1-10
Third Message
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Ephesians 2:1-10

Sometimes, you just need to get away from it all. You need to take a trip and spend at least a few days away from home. Away from home, sometimes your head clears and you can then see things more clearly. Shoot, I went on an hour-long bike ride the other day and came back with a different perspective.

Do you find yourself living anxiously by your own wits and muscle instead of living effortlessly in the world of God's active presence? A trip can reorient you.

Today, we're going to take a trip. This is a trip unlike any other, not least because you don't have to leave your seat. You will need to use your imagination, however. The trip we're about to take can effect a soul-transforming reorientation.

So, strap yourself in, because we're going to heaven.

Just because you're breathing

Ephesians 2:1-3:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Paul diagnoses the condition of humans before they come to Christ. He includes the Ephesians believers ("you were dead") and both himself and his coworkers ("we all") in his diagnosis. This is us, before we came to Christ. This is everyone who has not yet come to Christ.

We were dead. Well, we were alive in one sense, of course, but in the most important sense, we were dead, which means, as Paul says elsewhere in Ephesians, we

were "without God" and "alienated from the life of God" (Ephesians 2:12, 4:18). Apart from the life of God, we were dead. Just because you're breathing doesn't mean you're alive.

We were dead in our "trespasses," representing our rebellion against God, and our "sins," representing our failure to live according to his will. We were rebels and failures. We even "walked" in trespasses and sins, as if they were the paths we took. We were the walking dead.

We were influenced to walk in such ways by both "the world"—that is, the attitudes, habits, and preferences of collective humanity in opposition to God—and Satan, here called both a "prince" and a "spirit." Satan is a spiritual being who for now has authority, but not ultimate authority, in "the air," the invisible world between the earthly and heavenly realms. Satan is now influencing the "sons of disobedience"—that is, people who don't believe in Christ—to walk in transgressions and sins.

Before coming to Christ, we lived the way the sons of disobedience lived. In fact, we were sons of disobedience, governed not by the passions, desires, and mind of God but by the passions and desires of the "flesh" and by the desires our own minds, separate from the influence of God. Biblically, the "flesh" of an individual is that part of him or her that is opposed to God.¹

We were not only sons of disobedience, we were also "by nature children of wrath." The word translated "by nature" means "by birth."² We were born sinners, rebels against God. As Paul says in Romans 5:12, "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."

To be children of wrath is to be objects of wrath—objects of God's wrath, that is.

God is angry because of sin, because of what it does to humans and to the rest of his creation. Paul says in Ephesians 5:6 that "the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."

Such was our desperate condition: subject to the world, the flesh, and the devil and therefore destined for the wrath of God. We were dead.

A good kid

I was what you would have called a good kid. The oldest of three boys, I felt the burden of the first child, did what I was told, and obeyed the rules—mostly.

Probably the worst thing I did, as I shared a few weeks ago, was throw peaches at cars for the fun of it. I stole a one-cent piece of gum from a grocery store once because I was tired of waiting in line, and I felt terribly guilty for doing so. I certainly didn't consider myself a sinner. No one told me I was a sinner. I was a good kid. Or so I thought.

I had no faith to speak of. I considered myself an agnostic, but by the time I was fifteen years old, I believed the contention of one of my high school teachers, who said that humans invented God to explain the unexplainable. I could identify no need for God. In fact, I was quite pleased that my parents didn't make me go to church like some of my friends' parents. I was sure I would be bored to death, just like my friends.

But here's the reality of my condition back then, according to the word of God: I was dead in my trespasses and sins. I followed the course of this world. I followed the prince of the power of the air. I lived in the passions of my flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind. I was a child of wrath.

My good deeds, even the best of them, were "like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6). They counted for nothing. In fact, they counted against me, because my so-called good deeds had nothing to do with God and were even in some way probably an effort to tell him I didn't need him and he can therefore keep his nose out of my business, thank you very much.

Satan, working through the world and the flesh, has convinced literally billions of people that God, if he happens to exist, or the gods, if they happen to exist, will accept them if they are good people, more or less. Those who believe such lies are tragically mistaken. To have the audacity to think that you could possibly be good enough for God is itself an offense to God.

Next, Paul takes us to heaven. Are you ready?

Alive together with Christ

Ephesians 2:4-7:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

We were dead in trespasses and sins, but God was rich in mercy, even though our trespasses and sins were against him and his rule. The richness of his mercy emerges from the great reservoir of his love for us.

Paul has already said that God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand, on a throne, in the heavenly places, the unseen realms in which spiritual powers, including Satan and his demons, exist (Ephesians 1:20). In the heavenly realms, the Father now shares his throne with the Son (Revelation 3:21). Amazing!

But how about this: What God did for Christ, he also did for us. God has raised from the dead those of us who believe in Christ. He has seated us on a throne in the heavenly, unseen realms. We share in the victory of Christ over evil and we too have authority over Satan and his demons. God has united us with Christ so that his experience becomes our experience.

How can this be? Well, if you put together Ephesians 1 and 2, you realize that God is all-powerful and all-loving. He is *able* to do this for us and he *wanted* to do this for us, even if we were rebels and failures. In other words, "by grace you have been saved." To be saved involves being made alive together with Christ.³

God saved us not least to demonstrate who he is "in the coming ages," in all the ages—for all eternity. He is rich in mercy, and the riches of his grace, expressed in his "kindness toward us in Christ Jesus," are immeasurable. God wants all the universe to know of the immeasurable riches of his grace. How is the universe going to know? It's going to see us.

By grace, through faith

Ephesians 2:8-9:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Paul repeats himself: “by grace you have been saved.” Now, he completes the thought. We have been saved “by grace . . . through faith.” Faith—that is, faith in Christ—equates to receiving grace (Ephesians 1:15). God, in his grace, offers us Christ, and we, by faith, receive Christ. Faith is opening your arms to receive a gift.

“This” in verse 8 is “the gift of God.” But what is the gift? The gift is salvation, which is ours by God’s grace and through our faith. That means that even our faith is part of the gift. God makes it possible for us to receive Christ. Paul says here that we are saved “through faith,” but Luke writes of those who “through grace had believed” (Acts 18:27). Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).⁴

Salvation is “not a result of works,” as if we could save ourselves by anything we do. How can we make ourselves alive with Christ, raise ourselves up with Christ, and seat ourselves in the heavenly places in Christ? It’s preposterous that we could think that we could save ourselves, not least because we don’t have the power. Of course, people who hope that their works will qualify them for a satisfying afterlife don’t believe in salvation as Paul describes it.

Clearly, if we have been made alive, raised from the dead, and seated in the heavenly realms by God, we have nothing to boast about. The desire to boast reflects a desire to be independent of God. “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31, 2 Corinthians 10:17).

A bad man

People would have called me a good kid. No one would have called Jeffrey Dahmer a good man. He was a serial killer. He murdered seventeen men and boys between 1978 and 1991. He was worse than a mass murderer, but I cannot speak here of his other crimes.

Before Dahmer was sentenced, he said this:

Thank God there will be no more harm that I can do. I believe that only the Lord Jesus Christ can save me from my sins In closing, I just want to say that I hope that God has forgiven me. I know that society will never be able to forgive me. I know the families of the victims will never be able to forgive me for what I have done I have seen their tears, and if I could give my life right now to bring their loved ones back, I would do it. I am so very sorry

Dahmer closed by quoting from 1 Timothy 1:15-17, which reads:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

In prison, Dahmer was baptized, and more than one pastor who met with him was convinced of the validity of Dahmer’s faith. In 1994, the murderer was murdered, beaten to death by a fellow inmate. No one of course can say for sure, because no one can look into a person’s heart, but if Dahmer repented and turned to Christ, then he’s with the Lord now.

Jeffrey Dahmer, the mass murderer, and I, the good kid, were both at one time in the same, dreadful predicament: dead in our sins, children of wrath. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

If you have not yet turned from your sins and prayed to receive Christ, you are in great peril. You are dead in your trespasses and sins, subject to the wrath of God. I beg you: turn from your sins and pray to receive Christ, and you will be saved: God will make you alive together with Christ, raise you up with him, and seat you in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Finally, having taken us to heaven, Paul takes us back to earth.

Created for beautiful works

Ephesians 2:10:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We have nothing to boast about not least because we are God's workmanship. How can that which is made boast as if it had made itself? The word translated "workmanship" is an artistic word. We are works of art. God is the master craftsmen. We are each his masterpieces. He's the potter; we're the clay (Isaiah 64:8). God has created us—or, more accurately, recreated us—in Christ Jesus, as if Christ were the womb in which we were fashioned.

When we believed in Christ, God not only made us alive, raised us from the dead, and seated us in the heavenly realms; he also, with artistry and purpose, recreated us. He recreated us "for good works." Note: we are not saved *as a result of* "works"; we are saved *for* "good works."

If this is the case, then it's essential that we revel in the grace of God so that whatever we do increasingly emerges from thankfulness instead of a grim determination to do the right thing or to prove ourselves. Does grace make us lazy? May it never be! Paul says this about how the grace of God motivates him: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Listen to Eugene Peterson:

In fifty years of being a pastor, my most difficult assignment continues to be the task of developing a sense among the people I serve of the soul-transforming implications of grace—a comprehensive foundational reorientation from living anxiously by my wits and muscle to living effortlessly in the world of God's active presence. The prevailing North American culture . . . is, to all intents and purposes, a context of persistent denial of grace.⁵

If you understand that you are forgiven, you can love the way God wants you to love. Those who know that they are forgiven for much love much (Luke 7:47-48).

The word translated "good" can also be translated "beautiful," and such a translation is fitting given that we are creations of the master artist. The beauty of our works comes from the beauty of our creator.

God prepared these beautiful works for us "beforehand," at least before we do them, quite possibly before he recreated us and even, perhaps, before the foundation of the world. He recreated us so that we might "walk" in the beautiful works that he has prepared for us. The works that God delights in are those that emerge from a relationship with him. They're beautiful. God's preparation of beautiful works for us to walk in—this too is grace.

I look out at so many of you who are serving the Lord in so many ways and I say to myself, "That's beautiful."

Note: we once "walked" in trespasses and sins; now we walk in beautiful works that God has prepared for us.

The accidental journalist

I was dead in my transgressions and sins, but at the age of sixteen, a few months after hearing the gospel, I finally confessed that I was a sinner and prayed to receive Christ.

A few months before that, I met with my academic adviser, who suggested I take a class called "Multimedia News."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's working with the newspaper," she said.

Assuming that it was a civics class, I envisioned cutting out stories from the newspaper and discussing them in class. When I showed up to class, I was surprised to learn that I'd be working on the school newspaper.

After only a few weeks I decided that I would major in journalism in college and pursue a career as a journalist. And that's what I did—for eleven years, anyway. How I transitioned from journalism to ministry is a story for another day.

As a pastor, I started teaching the Scriptures. I felt like I was reporting. The stories were different; they featured the human quest for God instead of the news of the day, but they were still stories. And I'd been telling stories for years.

When I started studying the Scriptures, I felt like I was editing copy. I saw that the biblical authors were, in a way, reporters. The authors were confusing at times, but no less so than some of the reporters I worked with. And I'd been working with reporters for years.

When I started counseling, I felt like I was interviewing. As a reporter, I asked sources questions so that I could get to the bottom of the story. As a pastor, in order to offer someone helpful counsel, I needed to get to the bottom of his or her story. I had to ask the right questions. And I'd been asking people questions for years.

Note: *Before* I came to Christ, God arranged for me to enroll in a high school journalism class, setting me on a path to become first a journalist and then a pastor—specifically, the kind of pastor he made me to be. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God *prepared beforehand*, that we should walk in them.”

What sort of beautiful works has God prepared beforehand for you to walk in?

Reorient yourself

In Ephesians 2:1-10, we started out on earth, where we walked in our transgressions and sins. Then we went to heaven, where are seated with Christ on a throne. Finally, we came back to earth, where we walk in the beautiful works that God has prepared for us. What a trip!

Having been to heaven, can you see things more clearly now here on earth? Can you see—and appreciate—the soul-transforming implications of the grace of God? Do you think maybe you can reorient yourself away from living anxiously by your own “wits and muscle” and toward living “effortlessly in the world of God’s active presence”?

Revel in the grace of God!

Endnotes

1. Literally, we were carrying out not the desires of the “body” but the desires of the “flesh.”
2. The same word is translated “by birth” in Galatians 2:15: “We ourselves are Jews by birth . . .”

3. We “have been” saved, we are currently in a state of being saved, and we will be saved.
4. See also Acts 5:31, 11:18, 14:27, 16:14, 16:18, 18:27; Ephesians 6:23; Philippians 1:29.
5. Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 96.