

God's Amazing Grace

Ephesians 2:1-10

In our second Scripture reading we note God's gift to us: his amazing grace. The apostle Paul reminds us of what we used to be, and that what we are and are becoming today is solely by the working of a gracious, giving God.

² You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else, ⁴ but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through 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 ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward 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 the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

Our culture seems embarrassed by the reality of death. Commercials abound touting medicine and exercise that promise better health for us old folks and even longer life. Yet, we're living in a time that seems to be at war with the promise of health and longevity, with ever threatening diseases, international wars and unrest between and within nations, increasing gun-violence, and an alarming number of deaths from drug overdoses and suicides. The fight for longer, healthier and more care-free lives seems a losing battle.

I don't know about you, but all of this heightens my hope and longing for what God alone can give us—salvation now and everlasting life to come. I want to be fully alive as long as my mortal body lasts, but increasingly I long to be with Christ in Paradise. Our Scripture text is perhaps the highest "mountain peak" expression in the Bible on the meaning of salvation, on being rescued by God and given new life.

All of us, before we met Christ, were spiritually dead, regardless of how alive we might have appeared. This claim of our text may be contradicted by the lively appearance of those outside of faith in Christ. Who, in fact, seems to be more alive than the celebrities, entertainers and advertisers? Indeed, they're alive physically, mentally and socially, yet at the deepest level of their humanity many are dead while alive. All of us share a common condition—we were dead in our transgressions and sins (v.1). To understand and appreciate salvation we must realize that prior to salvation is the universal condition of spiritual death.

When we were dead through our transgressions and sins, there was no ability to respond or any inclination toward God. Like a corpse, there was no response to even the voice of or light of God's truth until his Spirit awakened us. There was continuing decay of our spiritual and moral faculties, i.e. the image of God, with which we were created. Our sins have alienated us from holy God. We're not sinners because we sin, but rather sin because we are sinners in our very fallen nature.

The course of spiritual death is a forced direction our lives are taking, farther and farther from God. These verses in our text describe the "living death" that takes place when a life succumbs to the world, the flesh and the devil. Paul describes this direction as carrying the sinner helplessly along the road to total destruction.

The spiritually dead are mere dupes of Satan, who influences the course of our lives apart from God. You're either under God's control and protection or under Satan's control, who seeks to drag us down with him to eternal death and separation from God, the second death (Rev.). Paul says the lost are captive to the lower sinful nature (v.3.), taken under the power of the devil, the world, and the self-centered flesh.

In a shopping mall some years ago I was captivated by an interesting item designed to assist shopping moms with their small children—a creative version of a stroller, which had a steering wheel for the child, yet the "ultimate" control is with the adult, who holds the long handle that overrides the child's steering. That's a picture of those outside of Christ, who think they're in full control of their lives. Yet it is Satan himself who overrides, who delights in the blindness and pride of the hearts of those who think they're in control.

Paul says we were objects of God's wrath, which is his only recourse when his love is rejected. The wrath of God is not a capricious, volcanic eruption of vengeance. When we spurn God's love, we bear the natural consequences of our rejection of his love. God hates sin, which alienates us from him. At this very moment we're under the sentence of condemnation (Jn. 3:18). Apart from God's grace we're already on death row, and only God's mercy has stayed the execution until we repent and receive his provision of mercy and grace through Jesus Christ.

Our Scripture gives a tremendous mood swing, and with the adversative conjunction, translated "*but...God!*" brings us from death to glorious life in Christ. Here (v. 4) is the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, rescuing us from the sentence of death and eternal separation from God.

Grace means unmerited favor, that which we so desperately need but could never deserve, nor do for ourselves. We Christians need the spirit of John Newton (1725-1807), that reprobate slave trader who certainly had known spiritual death and depravity apart from Christ. Grace became the theme of Newton's life, and *Amazing Grace* his theme song, which is possibly at the top of the charts for popular hymns, played and sung at public events.

God brought grace to us in Jesus Christ. Through what God did for us in Jesus Christ we have the means of salvation. Through his suffering and death on the cross, Jesus paid our sin penalty. All of our sinfulness and sins described in the first three verses of our text were atoned for on the cross. And his resurrection on the third day meant that his death had accomplished the will of the Father in paying our penalty for sin, which we all deserved to pay. Jesus continues to live to save all who will come to God through him (Heb. 7:25).

A song familiar to me says, *“Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe; sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.”* (Elvina M. Hall)

Without doubt, I am a hopeless debtor to God. I could never pay for my own ransom from sin or redemption from spiritual slavery. To pay my way out of sin and into heaven would require more than I could ever earn, borrow, beg or steal from now through eternity, even if every person of means I had ever known tried to help me buy my way from deserved hell to heaven. Jesus Christ, the King of kings, has written in his blood over the account of our sins, *“I have paid your debts.”*

Paul was addressing the religiously devout Jews as well as the pagan Greeks, the cultured and educated and also the barbarian underclass, the rich and the poor. Paul is saying that everyone is either spiritually dead or alive. Everyone apart from the rebirth is dead. There is no such condition as spiritually half-alive or half-dead. The immoral criminal with demented mind and seared conscience is spiritually dead, but so is the good, moral, civic-minded, church-going man or woman apart from faith in Christ. Like the legalistic and scrupulous Jews in Ephesus, so the religious person who works to earn favor with God is as lost as the agnostic, secular humanist or hedonist who cares nothing for spiritual or biblical truth.

Perhaps the worst sin barrier for grace to overcome is the barrier of pride that causes anyone to say, *“I don’t need to cast myself on the mercy of God. Christ didn’t need to die for my sins.”* That pride is more resistant to grace than the person in the grips of immorality who realizes his or her lost-ness.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (verse 8).

Grace is God’s movement toward us, and faith is our openness and movement toward him. Faith is the realization of our sin and need for God’s mercy and forgiveness. Faith sees that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died to pay our sin debt, and rose from the grave to give us the free gift of eternal life. Faith is the openness and willingness to turn from the way we’ve been thinking and living, and turn toward Christ and follow him as the Lord and Master of our lives. Saving faith is simply looking to and calling on Jesus.

This is part of the scandal and offense of the cross. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn or deserve our salvation and deliverance from

death. “*It is the gift of God.*” That pronoun “it” refers not just to grace but to the entire process of salvation. The grace of God and even our faith to believe are his gifts to us. We could not realize our need apart from the Spirit of God’s bringing us to that awareness. Faith involves the total abandonment of any attempt to justify oneself and openness to what God alone could do for us in Christ.

God’s grace does not just make up the difference in what certain of us cannot do to attain salvation. We are all in absolute need of grace alone. To compare the efforts of the good, religious person to the reprobate pagan is like comparing two people’s attempts to jump across the Grand Canyon, which averages nine miles from rim to rim. Suppose one person, like the best Olympic long jumpers, could leap from the edge about 29 feet, while the other, like me, could jump only about six feet. What difference would it make relative to 47,520 feet? When God built the “bridge across our sin to himself and to heaven, he didn’t stop at 100, or 30, or even 6 feet short. He built the bridge all the way. “It is the gift of God!” (v. 8).

The believer is “in Christ,” a key concept in Paul’s letters. Those of us in Christ are resurrected with him, and also are exalted with him. Even as he is bodily in heaven, so we now experience communion with him in “the heavenly places.” Though we are temporarily sojourners on the earth, our true citizenship is in heaven. We know God as our Father, Jesus as our Elder Brother, and one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Because we are seated with him in the heavenly places, we can know something now of heaven on earth. Even if our circumstances are more hellish than heavenly, when we receive the free gift of eternal life we become God’s kingdom people, with a new standing with God and as participants in his heavenly rule. This heavenly life means we are being created in Christ and prepared for eternity with him. Through this great salvation we are new creatures, with new minds, hearts, wills, desires, powers, and relationships. Paul says we are saved to be God’s workmanship, and the word is the Greek work, *poema*, from which we get the English word, *poems*. God is at work in us as his new creation, making us into his poems, in the classical sense of works of truth, balance, delight and beauty. He is making us to be like his own Son, full of poetic “rhyme and reason,” his works of art.

Years ago I was in Florence, Italy, viewing the 5.17 meter (17 foot) statue of David, regarded as one of Michelangelo’s two greatest masterpieces (along with the *Pieta*), what has been called the greatest depiction of the human form. In the year 1500, the city officials of Florence were disturbed that a valuable but useless piece of marble lay neglected and exposed to the elements in the yard of the cathedral workshop. They looked for an artist to use it, but even Leonardo Da Vinci declined the challenge. Eventually the 26-year-old Michelangelo saw this piece of marble not just for what it was but for what it could become under his patient and masterful workmanship over a period of 3 years.

God is at work in us, bringing us to perfection which will never be fully complete until he sees us face to face (1 Jn. 3:2). He superintends all the circumstances of our lives, and he calls us to respond to them in faith and faithfulness and trust. God has prepared in advance even the good works we are called to do. Our life work, and even the little, unnoticed acts of kindness are a prepared course God has designed for us. We are simply joining God in his eternal plan for us.

Paul eliminates all grounds for boasting. Grace and faith necessary for salvation are God's free gifts to us. Now that we belong to him, and our names are written in the Book of Life, we still can take absolutely no credit for our lives! We continue to depend on grace to do good works in the kingdom. Apart from the continuing work of grace in us, even our "good works" would be hollow and futile and meaningless. We never get to the place when we no longer depend on the grace of God

Chuck Swindoll says he is looking forward to heaven when no braggadocio Christians will be dropping names (mainly their own!) and telling all the great things they are doing for God. Everyone, he says, will have "grace" written across her and his life. As John Stott says, no one in heaven will be walking around like a proud peacock.

We all desperately need God's grace and we need it now and every day of our lives. And those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, his disciples, need to seek and to fulfill his purpose for us who is calling us to be his *poems*, his masterpieces. We are saved for the purposes of his glory and to seek to honor and please him with our lives, which have infinite value in his sight.

God gave me the gracious privilege of serving as your pastor these past ten years. It's been his amazing grace that has given me this privilege. I hope I've encouraged you to receive, live by and enjoy his grace toward you. Even though we'll go separate directions in serving, let's together commit ourselves to becoming what he has saved us to be in Christ, and do the works he has prepared in advance for us to do, for the glory of his amazing grace.