

“The Immeasurable Riches of His Grace ”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 2:1-10; Isaiah 54:1-10

Ephesians 2:1-10 is one of those great passages of Scripture with which most Christians are well-familiar. This passage contains important and well-known proof-texts for the doctrine of *sola gratia* (grace alone), as well as for the doctrine of total depravity. Most of us have memorized Ephesians 2:8. “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.*” Many are familiar with the opening verse of this chapter which reminds us that “we are dead in sin.” Our familiarity with this chapter is both good and bad. We may already know the details of the passage—which is good. But the downside is that we must not concentrate upon the well-known proof-texts to the exclusion of the other important points Paul is making. As we make our way through Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians we need to understand this passage as part of a larger discussion. In this section of Ephesians (chapters 1-3), Paul sets out his overall purpose in writing—to remind believers of our glorious inheritance in Jesus Christ so that we understand our role in God’s new society, which is the church of Jesus Christ. This, in turn, becomes the basis for the applicatory section of the letter, in chapters 3-6. A proper understanding of how God saves us from our sins, is the only proper basis for living the Christian life.

As we continue our series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we make our way into the second chapter as Paul continues to describe how it is that God saves us from our sins, and how we as Christians are to understand the course of human history (in general) and our place in that history in particular. In verses 3-14, Paul has already given us a Trinitarian panorama of redemptive history. Paul’s “big picture” (as we have been speaking of it) begins in eternity past when the Father chose a vast multitude of those whom he would redeem from their sins in the person of his Son. Paul moves on to recount that the Father sent his beloved son to die for all of those whom the Father had chosen. It was the shed blood of Jesus which redeems and secures the forgiveness of our sins for those given him by the Father. And then, Paul says, at a particular moment in time, the Holy Spirit called us to faith. We heard the word of truth, we were included in Christ, and we were then sealed until the day of redemption. Here we have the famous Reformed mantra—redemption decreed, accomplished, and applied. Paul has given us a redemptive historical panorama which takes us from eternity past to until that day when Jesus Christ returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new at the end of the age.

Whenever we look at the “big picture,” we see the love of God in saving sinners who truly deserve his wrath. We also see that Jesus not only took to himself a true human nature, but he came to earth to suffer and die to secure redemption for those whom the Father had chosen. But when God raised Jesus from the dead and Jesus ascended on high to take his place at the Father’s right hand, Paul says, it is clear that God has the power to do what he has promised. In the cross of Christ, we see God’s love and justice. In the resurrection, we see God’s power. In Christ’s ascension, we see Christ’s on-going rule over all of human history in his priestly, kingly, and prophetic offices. And this, Paul says, is the basis of our hope.

In verses 19-22 of chapter 1, Paul reminds us that in Jesus Christ, we see the “*immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all*

things to the church.” The very fact that Jesus—who had died for us—has been raised for us, and is presently seated at the Father’s right hand, means that Jesus is directing all things toward the end which God has ordained. This is how Paul views all of human history—serving the purposes of God in the redemption of his elect. This should also serve as the basis for a believer’s hope that no matter what our circumstances are on earth—that which Christ has won for us can never be taken from us. We know this because he has risen from the dead and then ascended on high. Because of this, our inheritance is secure.

As we saw last time, Paul sees all of history as the unfolding of two successive ages, “this age” and “the age to come.” Paul holds out no expectation for some sort of human utopia. Nor does Paul look for an earthly millennial kingdom either before or after Christ comes back. Paul is not a millenarian (either “pre” or “post”). As used throughout the New Testament, “this age” is always a reference to our temporal fallen human existence, while “the age to come” is always a reference to things eternal (and redeemed humanity). Paul reminds us that Jesus rules over both time and eternity. He rules over both this age and the age to come. Furthermore, because Jesus has been raised from the dead, there is a profound sense in which the age to come has already broken in upon the present. When Jesus rose again, the new creation dawned and our future inheritance is guaranteed, based upon what Jesus has already accomplished for us. This is what we mean when we speak of the already (those blessings we presently have “in Christ”) and the not yet (those blessings which are ours, but which we have not yet actually received—such as the resurrection of our bodies).

This is very important to keep in mind as we go through Ephesians chapter two, because one of the most important issues Paul addresses in our passage is the fact that even though we must live out our lives in the present evil age, Paul reminds us that God already sees us as raised with Christ and seated with him in heavenly places. Because of the already (chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, called and sealed by the Spirit), the blessings of the “not yet” (being raised from the dead and seated with Christ in the heavenlies) have already been secured for us by Jesus himself. This provides us with hope—no matter what happens in this life, our eternal inheritance is secure because of Jesus’ victory over death and the grave. This tell us how we must understand the events (good as well as bad) which unfold every night on the evening news. God is working out his purposes as Jesus is directing all things (including the wrath of sinful humans) toward the end he has foreordained. This also means that Jesus (who was raised, and who has ascended into heaven) is ever present with us through his Holy Spirit. He speaks to us through his word, and Jesus continually ratifies his promise to save us from our sins through the sacraments.

With the connection established between Ephesians 2 and what has gone before, we now turn to our text, the familiar ten verses which open this chapter.

One of the first things we should notice about this section of Ephesians is Paul’s use of “you” (most likely a reference to Gentiles) and “we all” in verse 3 (a reference to Jews, including Paul).¹ All people, whether they be Jew or Gentile, must be delivered from the guilt and power of sin. Human sinfulness is the common lot of the entire human race. Those Jews who looked down upon the Gentiles and considered them unclean, calling them dogs, ought not get too haughty, because the same sinful condition so apparent in Gentile godlessness, plagues the Jewish heart as well as the Gentile’s. Indeed, one of the striking things about Paul’s theology is his realistic view of the human condition, and how the fall of Adam (our biological and federal head) effects the entire human race (Jew and Gentile).

¹ Bruce, *Ephesians*, 280.

Paul opens this chapter with a very blunt assessment of the human condition. “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.*” Paul makes two very important points here. The first is that those reading/hearing his letter have *already* been raised to newness of life when they heard the word of truth and were included in Christ. When we came to faith in Christ, we did so knowing that we had been delivered from the universal human condition—sin, condemnation and death. But non-Christians don’t believe (or understand) that such a condition even exists. They refuse to believe that such a thing characterizes them!

Paul’s second point is that believers once walked in this condemnation (death and guilt), but no longer do so. The Father has chosen us, Jesus has died for us, the Spirit has called us. We have been rescued from our desperate condition into which we were born. This is what we mean when we speak of salvation (we are saved by God from his wrath) and “grace” (God was under no obligation to do any of this). Had God not taken the initiative to save us from our sins, we would inevitably remain in the sinful condition in which we were born, unable and unwilling to do anything about it.

Given the different ways in which Christians and non-Christians see the human condition, it is vital to understand how Paul’s perspective on human nature greatly differs from so many of our contemporaries. The average American believes that people are basically good. In practical terms, this means that the bad things people do are an anomaly. Bad behavior is an exception to what people truly are inside (basically good). When people steal, commit crimes, fall victim to addictions, etc., this is an indication that some external force has pulled them away from the good person they truly are by nature. The bad action is in no sense a reflection upon human nature. If you believe that people are basically good, then you see sin as a self-willed violation of society’s law and standards, or even a contradiction to your own personal code of ethics. If this is the case, then you will not see sinfulness as the basic human condition. Sins are actions you take, things you do. To be saved (on such a scheme) we must stop doing these bad things.

Paul, on the other hand, sees the human race as fallen. As the old Puritans put it, “in Adam’s fall, sinned we all.” The apostle contends that we are born in a sinful condition (which he calls “the flesh”), a condition which inevitably gives rise to particular sins. We sin because we are sinners. We sin because we like to sin, and we want to sin. Paul also believes that ours is a race in open rebellion against God. Therefore, we are completely unwilling to accept God’s right to judge us for our wrong-doing. We do not believe God has the right to do with us as he wishes because he’s given us freedom to do as we wish. We do not think it fair that God chooses to save some and not others. We think this way because we are unwilling to accept the fact that if God left us in our sinful condition, we could do nothing to save ourselves from that wrath which is to come on the day of judgment. This is what Reformed theologians speak of as “autonomy” (self-law). Because of sin, we are a law unto ourselves. Our beliefs about God, as well as our understanding of how he relates to us will have very little to do with what the Bible says, and most often stem from our own sinful foolishness, and ignorance about God and his grace.

Those who know that they are sinners by nature and by choice, and who find their only hope of heaven in the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, will hear Paul’s words and understand the gravity of that sinful condition from which they have been delivered. We don’t see it as an insult when Paul tells us that we were dead in sins and trespasses and that God must act to save us, or else we would not be saved. This good news is a reminder of that from which we’ve been delivered. Having been included in Christ (because God chose us in love), we can see that from which we have been saved. Like Paul, our heart should swell with gratitude because we’ve been delivered from that mode of existence in which we used to live—enslaved by sin and unable and unwilling to do anything about it. Suffice to say, people born in sin can do nothing to save themselves from God’s wrath and anger. They cannot correctly evaluate their

situation, until God enables them to look into the mirror of his law where our sinfulness is revealed to us.

In the latter part of verse 2, Paul continues his discussion of sinful human nature and its consequences. Because we are “dead in sins” we can do absolutely nothing to save ourselves. We all followed “*the course of this world*,” (literally, “this age”) following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.” Paul sets up an interesting parallel between the “age of this world” and “the domain of the air.” I take Paul to be describing how it is that in seeking autonomy (to be a law to oneself) we end-up unwittingly enslaved to that which is destined to perish (this age) as well as being unwittingly dominated by Satan (the ruler of the air), who keeps us in ignorance of the truth. We champion our freedom, but cannot see we are enslaved to our sin.

Paul’s statement here is a rather strong parallel to his comments in 2 Corinthians 4:4. “*In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*” In fact, in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8, Paul makes the same basic point this way. “*Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*” Paul’s point is that Satan keeps us ignorant of the truth, a situation which sinful people actually prefer.

Whenever we discuss the role of the devil as the enemy of God’s people, we must begin by erasing the images stuck in our heads from movies we’ve seen like *The Exorcist* or *The Omen*. The devil is the father of lies. Those who are enslaved by the ways of this present age have no eternal perspective on things. We eat, drink, and seek to be merry because tomorrow we die. This life and its joys and toils is all that there is. The work of Satan is not to possess teenage girls, make their heads spin around, and make them blaspheme at the sight of a crucifix. The work of Satan is to keep the people of this age bound to the ways of thinking and doing associated with this age—with no hope, no sense of the need for redemption, no hope in God’s purposes being worked out in the midst of this fallen and sinful world. That is what Satan does, according to Paul.

While the Jews of Paul’s day looked down upon the Gentiles as “unclean” because of their dietary habits and sexual immorality, Paul reminds his Jewish readers that sinful human nature extends to all of us—the entire human race, Jew and Gentile fell in Adam. Speaking of this present evil age, Paul writes, “*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.*” The very essence of being born dead in sin and trespasses is that we live in this present evil age, along with all of the others enslaved to the desires of the flesh. The collective goal in life of sinful humanity is to indulge our sinful desires, and to seek self-gratification, often at the expense of others. Paul lists the specifics of this in Galatians 5:19-21. “*Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.*” This list refers to the attitudes of mind as well as acts of the body.

Christians retain this sinful nature (the flesh). Like a freed slave, we must learn to live as a freedman. So too those of us who were born in sin and who remain inhabitants of this sinful and evil age must learn to think and behave like citizens of the age to come. As some have pointed out, this is essence of the Christian life—the life-long struggle to live out our new justified status in Christ. This means that those whom have been united with Christ will struggle against sin and the desires of the flesh until we die. But non-Christians know nothing but the things which Paul says are characteristic of the sinful nature and

this present evil age. The passions of the flesh are the only thing they know. They are blind to the truth. They remain indifferent to eternal things and they choose to ignore their very real peril.

For Paul these sinful actions and desires stem from the fact that we are by nature children of wrath. We all possess a sinful nature which produces the sinful thoughts and desires Paul describes here. We sin because we are sinners. We sin because it is our nature to do so. We will not and indeed cannot come to faith in Christ, unless and until the Holy Spirit calls us to faith and unites us to Christ. This is what we mean when we speak of “total depravity.” Our wills are enslaved to our sinful affections. We choose freely in the sense that no one else compels us to choose that which is evil. But since our nature is sinful, we will only choose (freely) sinful things. As Jesus himself put it, the bad tree must be changed into a good tree so that good fruit begins to appear. Apart from God acting upon us, we will remain dead in sins and trespasses. Slaves cannot free themselves. Dead people cannot resurrect themselves. People who are sinful by nature, will not “choose” Christ.

But Paul does not leave us under condemnation. In verse 4, the apostle writes “*but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.*” This is about as clear an affirmation of *sola gratia* (grace alone) found anywhere in Scripture. Paul’s words here echo passages such as Isaiah 54 (our Old Testament lesson) where the Lord graciously calls and redeems Israel, despite Israel’s unworthiness. Notice carefully what Paul says—it was while we were “dead in sin,” unable and unwilling to do anything to save ourselves, that God (whom Paul says is both loving and rich in mercy) acted upon us. As surely as God raised Jesus from the dead in a demonstration of his power, so too he has made us alive with Christ. The same divine life-giving power which raised Jesus from the dead, has given us new life. Through the preaching of the gospel, we were regenerated (born again), we came to faith in Christ (we heard the word of truth), we were justified, indwelt by the Spirit and are now united to our living head, Jesus, who is at the right hand of his Father in heaven.

Paul sums this up with the simple affirmation—“*by grace you have been saved,*” which we now unpack. While we were dead in sin, unable and unwilling to do anything about our condition and predicament, the Father chose us “in Christ,” Jesus died for our sins, and the Holy Spirit called us to faith when the gospel was preached to us. This is the meaning of “grace.” God is gracious toward us. He pours out his mercy upon us. In this, we see his love for us even while we are in the midst of our sinful rebellion. Notice too that Paul states that we “have been saved.” Paul uses the perfect tense here to emphasize that salvation is something we presently possess because of what God has done for us in Christ. Everything necessary for us to be delivered from God’s wrath on the day of judgment has already been accomplished for us by Jesus in his sinless life and sacrificial death. This is the meaning of “by grace you have been saved.” Paul’s focus is upon how we are the present beneficiaries of Jesus’ past good works.

Because we have been saved by grace, Paul wants us to consider the ramifications of this as we live out our lives. Because we are “in Christ” God has “*raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*” This is a remarkable assertion. As we trudge along through this life, struggling with sin, doubt, weak faith, as we go through all kinds of trials and tribulations, our eternal destinies are already settled and established. Because we have been chosen by the Father, redeemed by Christ, called and sealed by the Spirit (the benefits of the already), God sees us, and indeed treats us, as though we were already raised and seated in the heavenly places. This is the case because Jesus is present in heaven now, and we are said to be “in Christ.” Where he is, we are.

And just as God has already chosen us, redeemed us, called and sealed us, the final goal is assured and our inheritance is guaranteed—so much so, that in the coming ages (another way of speaking of the age to come as being eternal with no end)² God will be vindicated and we will be the beneficiaries of all that Jesus has accomplished for us. It is the knowledge of this dual citizenship and our awareness of the present rule of Christ over all things which sustains us in our trials and which gives us an eternal perspective on the present, something we could never have if God left us in our sins.

Paul is now obviously excited by thinking about the glories of such things, and he repeats himself in verses 8-9, although he adds several additional points. *“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.”* Once again Paul affirms that we have been saved by grace (the perfect tense indicates a present blessing resulting from something done in the past). But this time the apostle adds this comes *“through faith.”* It is faith which is kindled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the word of truth. None of this is our doing. God makes us alive when we were dead in sin. Once alive, we respond to Christ by placing our trust (faith) in him. Faith is not the one work God requires of us. We are not saved because we have faith. Rather, we are saved by the merits of Christ which we receive *through* the means of faith. Faith, in the biblical sense, is trust or reliance upon another—it is not some sort of existential leap in the dark. Salvation is a free gift. It was given to us despite our best efforts to resist and run away from it. And because our salvation is a free gift from God, we have no grounds whatsoever for boasting about anything that we might do in response to the grace of God poured out upon us *“in Christ.”*

As an brief aside, Reformed theologians have at times debated whether *“faith”* is the gift, or whether salvation is the gift of which Paul speaks, faith being part of the whole. While I think salvation is the gift spoken of, faith is certainly given us by God as a consequence of our being made alive together with Christ. Either way, the result is the same—we are saved by God’s graciousness to us, and united to Christ (the one who saves us) through the means of faith.

Given his panoramic perspective on these things, Paul goes on in verse 10 to speak of how the grace of God which saves sinners, also transforms those already given the free gift of salvation. *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”* We need to be very clear about the relation between God’s grace, our salvation, and good works. God has made us alive when we were dead in sin, we respond in faith, and it is because we have faith, that we do good works. That we are created *“in Christ”* to do good works is indicative of our participation in the new creation brought about by our Lord’s own resurrection from the dead. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul writes *“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”* Since we belong to the age to come and are already seated with Christ in the heavenlies, our conduct will now begin to manifest the fruit of the age to come which, in Galatians 5 Paul describes as the fruit of the Spirit. Here, Paul speaks of God’s grace as producing good works. Grace is the cause of which our works are the effect.

To look at this yet another way, God has chosen us in Christ, redeemed us in Christ, united us to Christ through the Spirit, sealed us until the day of redemption *“in Christ.”* Now Paul adds that *“in Christ”* we are God’s work of new creation. We will begin to do those very same good works which God ordained that we would do when we were chosen *“in Christ.”* While we can never be saved by good works, because everything we do is tainted by sin, those who are *“in Christ”* will begin to do good works, bear

² Bruce, Ephesians, 288.

the fruit of the Spirit, and start to put to death the deeds of the flesh. We are not saved by our good works. Neither will we be saved without them. The same Jesus who raised us up with himself in heavenly places, will begin in us the process of sanctification. This is what it means to have been saved by grace through faith and then created unto good works.

There are several points of application we need to draw from this passage.

Taking a big picture approach to these things, Paul takes us from the depths of human sin (dead in sin and transgressions) all the way to heavenly places—where those who were once dead in sin, are now seated and raised with Christ. Paul has made it perfectly clear that we can do absolutely nothing to save ourselves. We were dead in sin at that time when God acted upon to make us alive with Christ. This is what we mean when we speak of total depravity—not that we behave as badly as possible, but that we are absolutely unable to do anything to save ourselves, or incline God to love us, or motivate God to save us. We are by nature children of wrath—people who are worthy of eternal punishment. Not a popular message in modern America—but this is what Paul teaches.

But Paul does not leave us with the bad news of the human condition. After spelling out just how serious the human condition is (we are already dead, so it is too late for instructions, spiritual medicine or religious ceremonies), Paul abruptly interrupts his description of human sinfulness when he interjects the following—“but God, who is rich in mercy has saved us by grace, through faith.” God has given us the greatest gift imaginable. He has not only saved us (even though we can contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation), but God now calls us his workmanship “in Christ.” God unites us to his son, he changes our lives, he makes us citizens of the age to come, and because his promise will be realized, he already sees us as seated and raised with Christ. And all of this is by grace, through faith, apart from works.

And this is what Paul means when he speaks of “the immeasurable riches of his grace.”