

THIS IS YOUR LIFE

Ephesians 2:1–10

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The first three chapters of Ephesians deal with our wealth in Christ. I've called the message today, in Ephesians 2:1–10, "This Is Your Life." Some of you are old enough to remember Ralph Edwards' "This Is Your Life" program. The person would be surprisingly pulled out of the audience and Ralph Edwards would announce, "This is your life!" and a separate story of the person chosen would unfold each week. Ephesians 2:1–10 is sort of the "This Is Your Life" of every Christian. Unlike the "This Is Your Life" program, which was separate and unique each week, there are things that we share together as believers—all of us in this room—that mark the past and the present and the future of our walk with God.

In these verses, Paul shares with us the three phases that belong to the life of the Christian. The first phase is the phase of death. Verses 1–3 say, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath" (NIV). This is the unpopular part of the gospel message—the part that says that, if you as a person are outside of the gospel of Jesus Christ, you are dead. This is a message that, when we are outside of Christ, we really don't like to hear. It is the offensive part of the gospel. To the person who believes that they're living authentically and morally, to have the Christian message come along and say, "In spite of your attempt to live ethically and morally, you're dead," it sounds so repugnant.

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To the strong strapping young high school athlete who's a football player, who's outside of Christ, to have someone say to him, "If you continue outside of Christ, your physical strength and stamina means nothing. You are dead." That is offensive.

To the socialite or the person who is achieving some measure of financial success without a care in the world, or the hard working person who's simply putting bread on the table, trying to do the best he or she can do, yet outside of Christ, this message, "You are dead," is offensive.

But if we're to begin in Christ at all, we must begin with the recognition that, when we stand outside of Christ, we really are dead. What does that mean? What are the implications of that?

When I first came to the church, about eleven years ago, we had a mortician in the congregation. He thought that the new pastor should have the chance to witness an embalming, that this would bring him more in touch with what was really going on. I guess, at the time, that was something they put new recruits in the police force through as well. It was an eye-opening experience to witness an embalming. I never had such a real view of death in all of my life. And I'd been at funerals, presided over funerals. But I realized, in witnessing that embalming, that when we are physically dead, there is total impotence. The corpse is totally hopeless. The corpse is totally unresponsive. Not only unresponsive to being talked to, but unresponsive to anything physical happening to it. The corpse is also subject to corruption.

That's exactly what the Scripture means by "spiritual death." That, when we are outside of Christ, we are impotent. We are helpless. We cannot save ourselves. There's no way that, on our own, we can come into eternal life or into favor with God.

When we are dead, we are unresponsive to God. That's why Paul, in this passage, will talk about grace being a gift. And faith itself is a gift. We're unable, on our own, to respond to God. Unless

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the Spirit of God touches us and makes us living, we can't respond to God at all. We are also subject to corruption, even if we are moral persons. We're in a downward spiral.

Paul says that death has occurred because of transgression and sin. Transgression simply means to misstep. It was as though I was walking off the platform, and miss my step, and fall down.

Many people have come under the bondage of the evil one through making mistakes. And sin—more on the level of deliberate transgression, shooting at a mark and missing it, often deliberately—sin is missing the mark.

Sin is the failure to be what we ought to be and what we could be. Paul says we're dead if we're without Christ. How do we get to be dead?

I. What explains the manifestation of death in our lives?

There's a three-fold answer.

A. We are dead because we followed the ways of “this world” (verse 2), not referring to terra firma, the earth, or dirt. The “world” is humanity or civilization that's apart from God. And once we were in that mold.

Scriptures have a practical recognition that, by and large, we are a conforming people. Society expects certain things of us and the pressure is on to conform. The pressure is on, many times, to conform spiritually. It's on to conform physically. I'm intrigued by fashions of young people these days. Kids try to struggle to conform.

We all face struggles to conform. I was in an audience some time ago where a person was being given a standing ovation, that I felt didn't deserve it. Everybody around me began to stand, and I said, out of principle, “I'm not going to stand. I'm going to sit.” It was a terrible struggle to keep my seat. As the meeting went along, another standing ovation was given and I happened, at that time, to be around more friends. They were all standing, so I bent and I stood, even though on

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the inside I was sitting down. I couldn't take the pressure of the group. I wanted desperately to conform.

Most of us in this room have a mixed record on the whole subject of conforming. There are moments in our life we can say, with a shining example, that we stood firm. But other moments, we followed the course of this world. What is the course of this world that Paul is talking about? Statements people make: "Truth is unattainable, search for it as long as you can, you'll never find it." "One religion is as good as another." "It doesn't matter what you worship, as long as you're sincere." "Right and wrong is a matter of personal choice." "There is folly in marriage." "There is joy in being gay." "Virginity is Victorian." "Might makes right." All these kind of things can be heard floating in the secular market these days. Conforming to the world.

B. The second thing that makes us dead is the devil. The spirit of him who is now at work in those who are disobedient, the ruler of the kingdom of the air. Behind the conforming pressure of the world is the devil. The Scriptures take the devil seriously and count him as a personal individual. Not some ethereal force out there. A lot of people have problems believing in the devil. I suppose they've never been around evil enough. That's maybe why they have problems. Besides, the devil is the only major world power whose principle foreign policy is to keep people from believing he exists. A real difference from the foreign policy of Russia, for example. Russia's foreign policy is not to persuade the nations of the world it doesn't exist. Neither is that America's foreign policy. But it is Satan's foreign policy. To persuade many that he doesn't exist. Scriptures say he's working behind the curtain. He's the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2).

Some have mistakenly taken this to mean that he's mixed up with the radio and TV waves. This has nothing to do with radio and TV waves. The prince of the power of the air doesn't have

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anything to do with Los Angeles smog, either. Some people, when they read Scripture, read what they want to see into it. Therefore, they sometimes misread it. The prince of the power of the air has to do with the fact that Satan is the unseen ruler behind the visible world, the invisible force. That's exactly what "kingdom of the air" means. His activity is manifest continually in disobedience.

Does Satan want to frustrate the work of God? Obviously. Does Satan want to frustrate individuals? Obviously. He is behind the curtain. And that partly explains our behavior when we were dead.

C. The third thing Paul says that made us dead is we had the cravings of sinful human nature. Sinful human nature is the word "flesh." King James has translated it "flesh." That's a more literal translation. "Human nature," though, perhaps translates it best. It says that some people think that when the Bible talks about flesh, it means "skin." When the Bible uses the term "flesh" as sinful human nature, it doesn't mean "skin." It doesn't even necessarily mean sexual immorality, although flesh includes sexual immorality. It can refer to sins of the body or sins of the spirit. It can refer to immorality, but it can also refer to discord, jealousy, and fits of rage. Like when there's a real falling out in the family and one has a fit of rage. That is a work of the flesh—envy, drunkenness, orgies, hatred, factions and the like. Flesh is human life lived apart from God. The end result of following the course of this world, the prince of the power of air, and the desires of the human flesh, is that we become alienated from God and become the objects of God's wrath. We were, by nature, objects of wrath.

That bothers people too. What does it mean to be "an object of God's wrath"? If we are apart from Christ, God's mad at us. Is God teed off at us? Is God just waiting for the right moment to

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nuke us? Does He have a great big bat and is He ready to lower it on our heads? That's the image of God that's conjured up by some people concerning the wrath of God.

But the wrath of God is not like that at all. If you wanted a simple definition of the wrath of God, it'd be something like this: "The wrath of God is the operation of the law of consequences." If

that's a little bit too much, let me illustrate it. The wrath of God is the operation of consequences.

You know that the law of gravity carries with it wrath. Gravity's not mad at any body. Gravity is not waiting to get even with someone. Gravity is not passionate in the sense we think of anger.

Gravity is a law of wrath. You say, "I don't believe that."

Let me propose to you an experiment that you don't do. Go get on a roof, commit your entire body to going over the roof, without a parachute or any sky-diving equipment of any kind. If you step off that building, you'll find that gravity has a law of wrath. And the law of wrath is simply the law of consequences. You do certain things to break the law of gravity, and you must live with the consequences of breaking that law.

It's the same thing in reference to the wrath of God. If we break the law of God, we experience the consequences of breaking that law. Which, in the case of God, is stepping outside of His favor, incurring His judgment.

The same thing happens if my dog, in running to meet me, slips out the door and into the street. If he insists on running away from me, he must live with the consequences of what might happen to him. Wrath may wait for him.

The wrath of God is not, therefore, something of an angry God who's really teed off and waiting to smack off one more human, like we would swat a fly. But it's the fact that God has built into His universe consequences that relate to the moral and spiritual decisions we make. And,

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therefore, we fall under His wrath if we are outside of Him. That's why the psalmist said, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

II. Thank God our phase of life doesn't end with death. That's only the first phase. Because the next phase is salvation.

That is our life also. If we come into Christ, we come out of death. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 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" (Ephesians 2:4–9, NIV).

What has God done to us in this second phase of our experience?

A. Paul says, "First, he has revealed His character to us. He is the God who is rich in mercy and great with love toward us." We know this, of course, from the life of Jesus. How can we ever forget the story of the Prodigal Son? Where the key point of the story is not the lost son, but the waiting father, who yearns for his children to return to him from their vantage points of death. We have learned the character of God from Jesus.

One of the tragedies among many of you, perhaps, in your Christian walk, is that, even though you've come to Christ, you've not yet gotten a full glimpse of the character of God. You still have the emotional feeling that God is waiting to bump you off, waiting to find some excuse to rid His kingdom of you. Such a view is not consistent with His great love and His great mercy. I pray that, somehow, God would use that great character of His and let the Spirit emblazon that in

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your inner heart, where your emotions are, and suddenly, you realize that God is rich with love toward you, not just toward the world in general.

B. Another thing that Paul tells us about our salvation is that God has “made us alive with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5). The tense here is very important. It’s not “God *shall* make us alive with Christ.” We’re not waiting until our death and subsequent resurrection to be made alive. Not the word “is *making* us alive.” That refers to an ongoing process. But the word is “He has *made* us [past tense] alive with Christ.” We’re in Christ and we’ve already been resurrected to newness of life, even though we may have physical death to go through yet. The message of the gospel is that salvation is so guaranteed to us that we may already think of it as resurrection. We have been made alive.

God made us alive in Christ. Non-Christians look at us and they don’t know that we have already been made alive. The event has already happened. Christ died for us, and when He rose again from the dead, we were with Him on the cross. We were with Him in the grave. And the event has already happened. It is made certain to us. So salvation implies that we have already been resurrected with Christ. We have been made alive. In addition to that, Paul says, “He’s seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms” (verse 6). You say, “Paul must not have known where I was living this week—because I was in a lot of seats, but none of them were in heaven.” Ezekiel said one time, “I sat where they sat and I was astonished” (Ezekiel 3:15). Maybe if all of us sat where everybody else sat, we’d be astonished too. You say, “Where I was sitting this week was anywhere but the heavenly realms.” Paul says, “It’s already happened. You have taken your seat in the heavenly realms.”

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What does it mean “to take one’s seat”? It’s a term we use in a parliamentary sense, don’t we?

When someone is elected to congress, we describe them as taking their seat. That’s the kind of thing we have in the Scripture here.

In the heavenly congress, we were elected to the seat of being a joint heir with Christ for the ages to come. We’re already there. We’re already seated. We have that office given to us. We have been seated in the heavenly realm.

It’s a gift from Christ, not anything we’ve earned on our own. Why has God gone through all this effort to seat us in the heavenly realm and to make us alive? It’s all by grace and not by works.

It’s by faith and not by effort. Why has He gone to all this activity? What does He want out of us? Is His design to populate eternity with slaves? Does He want us to be part of His family so there will be somebody around to mop the golden streets fifteen hours a day? Why are we to be there?

We’re to be there in order that He might forever show us the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness through Jesus Christ. On a physical level, we do not come into being as a result of our own effort. I was not born as a result of my own effort. Human life was an act of grace. It was a gift given me. It was a gift given you. This principle, which applies to the physical level, applies to the spiritual level as well. Spiritual life is a gift given us; therefore, we have no grounds for boasting. None of us have any grounds for boasting of the color of our skin. That was not our choice. That was God’s choice for us. None of us can boast of our ethnicity or the country or the life we came from—that was not our choice. It was a given. None of us can boast that we are in the family of God. For that is a given as well. It is a mark of God’s work in us.

So, the second phase of our life is salvation.

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III. The third phase of our life is service.

Someone has so beautifully said, “We are saved to serve.” “For we are God’s workmanship [Someone has said, “God doesn’t make junk”], created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10, NIV). As you know, if you’ve been a Christian for any amount of time, the Christian life doesn’t begin with self-effort, but with God’s effort. God has done things for us, and we respond with good works. I see good works in the Christian life as simply a way of saying thanks to God for what He’s done. It’s not a means of earning His favor, it’s a way of giving thanksgiving. All the good works which I’m supposed to do, which I am called to do, God has prepared in advance for me to do. How has He done that? He’s given me His Word. He’s given you His Word. He’s given us the Spirit. He’s given us the example of others in the Christian community, that we might know the kinds of good works to work in.

Our heavenly Father is interested in more than simply our birth. He’s interested in the course of our life. He has prepared in advance works for us to do. He’s given us patterns, in His Word and through His Spirit and the Christian community, of what we are called to do. God wants us to be more than simply boring. He wants us to live out our life as a consequence of grace and good deeds. God calls us to service.

I pray that God will put in your heart a service you can do for Him. Too many in the body of Christ today simply sit on the sidelines and don’t get their hands dirtied enough with service to family, to community, and to the church. God wants servants to walk in the way that He has foreordained. A way that He’s prepared for us.

Closing Prayer

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Father, we thank You again for these moments we've had today in Your presence. I pray for any here today who might still be living in the depth of sins. That, in this very hour, their hearts be quickened by Your grace and that they would know the joy of salvation. I pray, Lord, for others in this room who perhaps have entered into salvation but have yet to enter in the joy of service for You. Today, You're calling us to a new level of dedication of our life; to serve one another in family. You're calling us not to stand up for our privileges, but to take our stand as a servant, with a towel, and to wash people's feet whom we think should be washing ours. I pray for this entire church that it would be marked in this community by good works. Where people would know us by the fact that the Lord Jesus dwelt in us in such a way that we are a community of people who care for others in this world, more than the fact that we are a community of faith. If only, Lord Jesus, we will care for one another and for the world like You cared for it. And walk in the way that You have prepared in advance that we should walk in. That's our simple prayer, Lord. Not a prayer that brings us into condemnation, but a prayer of aspiration, that we might be like You. Take our life and let it be holy, dedicated, Lord, unto Thee. Amen.