

# Ephesians 2.1-10

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## God's Gift

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 17 March 2024

God's Good News [5]

### But

§ The owner of an art gallery phoned one of his top artists. He said, 'I have some good news, and I have some bad news.'

The artist replied, 'Tell me the good news first.'

'The good news is that a woman came in here today asking if the price of your paintings would go up after you die. When I told her they would, she bought every single one!'

'That's great!' said the artist, 'So what's the bad news?'

The owner paused, 'She's your GP.'

Are you a good news first or a bad news first person? I find that whichever comes first, I tend to get fixated on the bad news! As we look at today's aspect of God's Good News – God's Gift – one of the most important words to remember is simple: § **'but'**.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus Paul begins with a good news bad news sandwich. Have a look with me in your Bibles at chapter 1. The first part is a single sentence of breathless praise, mentioning Jesus at least a dozen times. Then Paul moves into a prayer for deeper knowledge, hope, power and strength – before ending in praise again. Ephesians chapter 1 is so rich, I feel I could preach on it for a year and still have more to say!

However, the first ten verses of Ephesians chapter 2 are one of my top, top favourite parts of the Bible. I think they capture clearly and distinctly some of the most important and glorious truths about who God is, what he has done for us in Jesus \_ and *why*. These verses also diagnose brutally but honestly the hopelessness of the human condition: the deep pit we have dug for ourselves, and the wonderful way God lifts us up and sets us on the right path again. They also contain one of the greatest ‘but’s in the Bible – so to speak – look at verse 4 with me **J**:

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.

*Ephesians 2.4-5 (NIV)*

However, we’re getting ahead of ourselves... first, the bad news.

## Bad news (1-3)

In the Church of England is something called 'The Blue File'. There is one for every member of the clergy. It is filled with everything written about that person, from references to reports to job applications. It includes letters to and from the bishop about the person, and anything we write to the bishop. For obvious reasons they are kept locked away in the bishop's office, and most clergy never read theirs. In 2011 I read mine. I had applied for what the Church of England calls PTO which stands for 'Permission to Officiate' – a licence to lead services and to preach. Instead I received a letter from my bishop inviting me to come and read my blue file so I could find out – and I quote – 'what a deep hole I was in.'

So I did, and discovered a letter had been written about me that was unkind, unfair and in parts untrue. The language they used was carefully chosen to make it impossible for me to get PTO – two sentences undoing years of positive reports and references from people who knew me far better and for far longer. The story has a happy ending of course: my bishop gave me an opportunity to demonstrate the letter was false, and it didn't take long before I was granted a licence again.

My point in telling that story isn't to elicit sympathy – though it might help explain my feelings towards the Church of England! My bishop was right: I had to know 'what a deep hole I was in.' Only then could I understand what needed to be done.

**As for you**, Paul says (verse 1), **as for you, you were** **dead in your transgressions and sins**. This is far worse than a letter in a blue file. The hole we are in is deep indeed: we are physically alive but spiritually **dead**, powerless, useless.

It's a bit like this lamp. It works beautifully *switch on and off* until I pull the plug out *pull it out*. In a sense it's still a lamp, but when it's disconnected from the thing that makes it work, it's not much more than a few bits of metal and plastic.

This is how **you used to live** (2), Paul tells the Ephesians.

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 flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

*Ephesians 2.2-3 (NIV)*

Later the church summed this up as ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’. These are the forces that deceive, distract and destroy. They are powerful and hard to resist. The **ways of the world** are like the current of a stream – it’s hard to swim against the current.

The **ruler of the kingdom of the air** is the devil who is **at work in those who are disobedient**. ¶ Remember Satan’s shifty answer to God in Job 1 & 2? He roams the earth, **going to and fro**, up to no good, doing his best to spoil God’s good creation.

Those first two are external forces. But there’s also an internal battle; Paul talks about us **gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts** (3). Paul does not mean that our bodies are evil, that we are souls trapped in a bodily cage set free when we die. That is not what the Bible teaches, at all. God made us physical beings: for example appetite for food is good and useful, until it turns to gluttony.

The problem is when our **desires and thoughts** are twisted in onto ourselves, when we follow them indiscriminately, when we allow them to control and direct our behaviour. Like **the ways of the world**, like **the ruler of the kingdom of the air**, our **desires and thoughts** cannot be trusted; the world, the flesh and the devil conspire to lead us down the wrong path.

I wonder if Paul had in mind Jesus' own teaching on this **J**:

'Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.'

*Matthew 7.13-14 (NIV)*

The **road that leads to destruction** might be easy – but we are still responsible for walking through its **wide gate**. Paul says (verse 3): **like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath**.

God's **wrath** is a difficult topic. For some it doesn't fit with our view of God. You are of course entitled to have whatever view of God you want – but if it doesn't include wrath, your view is not the one we find in the Bible.

Let me say three things about this.

First, God's wrath is not like human anger. God does not have a bad temper, he does not 'fly off the handle'. He is rightly angry at the evil that spoils his world. John Stott defines it as **J**:

his personal, righteous, constant hostility to evil,  
his settled refusal to compromise with it, and  
his resolve instead to condemn it.

*John Stott, The Message of Ephesians, 52*

I think it is good that God reacts to evil in an uncompromising and unchanging way!<sup>1</sup> We are powerless against evil – even the evil in us. We need God to stand up against it, to defeat it for us.

Second, Paul has switched his language. In verse 1 he says **as for you** – in verse 3 he says **all of us... like the rest**. His diagnosis applies to himself, to the Ephesians, to us – everyone is included.

Third, and this is critical: God's **wrath** is not incompatible with his **love**, but **held together in God's character**.<sup>2</sup> In the same breath – for verses 1-7 are one sentence – Paul moves from talking about God's **wrath** (3) to his **mercy** and **love** (4).

## Good news (4-9)

**J** 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.

*Ephesians 2.4-5 (NIV)*

And so we arrive at the glorious 'but'. Paul uses the word **love** twice: **because of his great love with which he loved us** (NET). In a wonderful and glorious contrast, although **by nature** we are **dead, deserving** God's **wrath** – **by grace** we are saved, **by grace** we are **made alive, by grace** we receive his **great love**.

Last weekend England's rugby team played Ireland in the Six Nations championship. It was a pulsating match. The lead switched five times before the clock ticked over 80 minutes: with Ireland winning 22 points to 20. All they had to do was kick the ball into touch and the championship would be theirs with a match to spare. For England, the match was lost.

But England had the ball, and they were attacking. Ireland defended valiantly, but were caught napping when the ball was spun back to ¶ Marcus Smith, in front of the goalposts – and with the final kick of the game he scored a drop-goal, winning the match for England 23-22. Twickenham went wild, and Irish hearts were broken: no back-to-back Grand Slams. 'It's not over until the final whistle' – so the saying goes, and matches like that prove the point.

Friends, notice the tense in these verses: ¶ God **made us alive** (5), **raised us up** (6), **seated us with** Christ (6), **you have been saved** (8) – these are things that have **already happened**. When it comes to God's **great love**, when it comes to our salvation, when it comes to our true home, ¶ *the final whistle has been blown*. There can be no drop goal to steal the victory away from God's children at the last minute. All this is ours in Jesus: **he has won**.



Paul' words tumble breathlessly, the glory of God and the wonder of our salvation is too much for words, but Paul does his best...

**Because of his great love for us** (4). God, full of love, isn't away up there and distant – he loves *us* with that love. He loves *you*, with a love greater than you can imagine.

**God, who is rich in mercy** (4). In his mercy God doesn't give us what we deserve but offers us something else instead.

**Made us alive with Christ even when we were dead** (5). The contrast – from death to life – could not be greater. The bad news is hard to hear, but it makes this good news all the greater.

**And God raised us up with Christ** (6). When Jesus rose from the dead, death was defeated once and for all. The life God offers us in Jesus is no longer subject to death.

**He seated us with him in the heavenly realms** (6). For God's children our home is not this world; we belong to God's kingdom now, not **the kingdom of the air** (2).

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.

*Ephesians 2.7 (NIV)*

¶ Elon Musk is rich – to the tune of \$180bn, give or take. It’s an unimaginable amount of money. But if he gave it all away, equally to every person alive, we’d all get ¶ a little over £20. I wouldn’t say no, but it’s not that much.

For all his billions, Elon Musk has nothing compared to the **riches** of God’s **grace** and **kindness in Jesus Christ**, which God will spend eternity lavishing upon his people: it never runs out.

Is not this good news? Is not this more than we could ask or imagine? Is not this more than we could dare to hope for?

And it is all – every part of it – **God’s gift**. Paul repeats: **it is by grace you have been saved** (5), and again in verse 8 ¶:

¶ It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and [all] this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

*Ephesians 2.8-9 (NIV)*

Paul says it ¶ four times in those two verses: (1) **by grace**, (2) **not from yourselves**, (3) **it is the gift of God**, (4) **not by works**. Do you get the message? Do you understand what Paul is saying here? This is not something we deserve, this is not something we can discover, this is not something we can do for ourselves.

This is **God's gift**, his gift of love. It is a gift, so **no-one can boast** (9). As God's children we mustn't think or act as though we are better than everyone else. Paul made that clear in verse 3: **like the rest we were by nature deserving of wrath.**

No: God's children are simply those who receive God's gift with open hands and unwrap it gratefully and joyfully. In this glorious passage about what God has done, we have a very tiny part, tucked away in verse 8: **by grace you have been saved, through faith.** Faith – putting our trust in God, leaning our weight on him, believing that he has the words of life – is how we receive **God's gift.**

## Good works (10)

Paul ends this section with these words:

We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

*Ephesians 2.10 (NIV)*

In case we didn't get it the first four times, Paul says it two more ways: (1) **we are God's handiwork**, (2) **created in Christ Jesus.** This is something God is doing, and what he's doing is making us new, transforming and recreating us as his children.

We receive God's gift of new life by faith – and we respond to his gift by living as God's children every day, by accepting his way of life not 'my way'.

A couple of weeks ago I had a few days off but Jess was working so I stayed at home. As parents like to do, mine presented me with a load of my stuff that had been in their loft for 20 years: my LEGO Technic. So I spent a happy couple of days cleaning and sorting it all, before building one of my favourite kits. My parents bought it for me when I was 14, not expecting I would build it again aged 40! They are delighted to see me still enjoying their gift.

Friends, God's gift of life isn't some ornament to sit on the shelf and gather dust. It's something to use, something to build with, something to enjoy, something to spend our lives exploring.

In some ways that looks the same for all of us. Growing a godly character, becoming like Jesus – that's for all God's children. But we are also all unique, with different circumstances and life situations. What does it mean for you to live faithfully, as a child of God, where you are? How can you live out, how can you bear witness to this wonderful gift of God – to your family, to your friends, to your colleagues, to your neighbours?

As I finish, perhaps something of Paul's message has hit home to you this morning. Perhaps you feel yourself being pushed along by the world's current, floundering and helpless. Perhaps you feel under siege from an unseen and powerful enemy. Perhaps you struggle not to gratify the desires and temptations you feel inside. Perhaps you feel numb, lost, alone – perhaps you know, deep in your heart, that Paul is right: you are spiritually dead.

We all need to hear and know the truth of these words **§**:

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.

*Ephesians 2.4-5 (NIV)*

That gift of life is for you this morning – do you want it?

Let us pray.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (London: IVP, 2020), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Stott, 53.