

## Ephesians 2:1-10

### *The Gift of God*

Power is one of the great themes of Ephesians. Ephesus was a major center of Roman imperial power. The Caesars craved adulation and notoriety, and so the Roman emperors established and maintained places where their rule could be celebrated and enhanced. Ephesus was such a place. It was at the center of this great political and social power of Rome.

Ephesus was also a center of religious power. The whole Roman world was dominated by the principalities and powers of recognized gods and goddesses. All sorts of cults flourished, most of them seeking power through the magic arts. Magic had the power to make things happen, to influence people and events. There were the false gods and goddesses and Ephesus was the home of the most powerful goddess of the region—Artemis, or, as the Romans called her, Diana. The Ephesians sought her favor for their wealth and health. They called on her to destroy their enemies. Women offered sacrifices and prayed to her for safe delivery through the dangers of childbirth. There were very few “atheists” in Ephesus. Their faith in their gods, especially in Artemis, was strong and enduring. With that as background, we ask, “*How does it happen that some in Ephesus come to believe in a crucified Jew who his followers claimed to be raised to a new kind of life in a real body that would last forever? What kind of new power is this?*” Paul has the only explanation that really makes any sense. He speaks of a power greater than Rome and greater than Artemis. A power that gives life to the dead!

**Eph 2:1-10** (ESV) *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. 4 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. 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 a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

“*And YOU were dead!*” Paul’s audience hasn’t changed. He is still writing to the Ephesians. The last line he wrote (at the end of chapter 1) spoke to them about the Church, with Christ as head, and we are His body, and the Church is the fulness “*of all in all.*” Paul has taken our minds to the heights of glory! And then Paul says, “*You were DEAD!...*” Paul is reminding them where they came from. That in terms of their relationship to God and the Church they were at one time cut off and walking and living in a culture that was dead to the true living God. They were not as free as they might have thought. They had been servants and followers of an evil prince. Paul will call this ruler the Devil later in the letter, but for now Paul focuses on the state of the Ephesians as they were—before they encountered Christ through Paul’s preaching.

Paul's language here really does echo back to the story of the Exodus and a mighty Pharaoh leading his people in rebellion against someone he only knows as "LORD". When the Lord God shows up to rescue His people from Egypt, there is death and chaos in that nation. God shows the entire world His might and power, but more than that, he shows His mercy and love for His people. The point of the story of Exodus is that the Lord God saves and rescues and elevates a people who were essentially powerless and in despair. In other words—*Dead!* So when Paul reminds the Ephesians "*You were dead...*" he wants them to know that it is God's power, not theirs, that saves them. God's power is greater than Rome and Caesar and Artemis, just as it was against Egypt and Pharaoh and his gods. God pierces a culture that is rich, powerful, well established, has deep religious and political traditions, and shows it for what it really is: powerless before Him. Paul's whole point in his prayer in Chapter 1 is that we experience this power in the Church. It has not diminished. When we ask, "*Can WE break through and penetrate our culture today?*" Paul would say, "*Of course!*" The power is there, we have been given a great gift. The problem may be us. We fall victim to the powers that surround us and Paul will warn us about this later. When Paul talks about the "*prince of the power of the air*" he knows this power is the atmosphere we live in, the air we breathe. Most people are unaware of this "prince" and the power he has over us because we do not see him, and that is the way he wants to keep it. We are like fish. Ask a fish "*How's the water?*" and he will reply, "*What's water?*"

So when Paul says to the Ephesians, "*You were dead in the trespasses and sins 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...*" he is describing the plight of people who are happily swimming along, totally unaware that they are following a leader who is leading them to their doom. And perhaps what Paul says next is the most difficult thing for his Jewish friends to accept: "*...we all once lived in the passions of our flesh ... and [we] were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*" (v.3)—in other words, "*WE Jews were no different from Gentiles—WE were just as dead as YOU Gentiles.*" He leaves no loophole for Jews to say, "*But we are different!*" Paul had reminded them in Romans 2:24 they were supposed to be different, but they failed: "*The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*" Paul is of the nation of Israel. It was Israel who saw the Exodus, who experienced the power of God, but then so quickly forgot it. Then Israel was just as quickly absorbed by the culture—and followed after the prince of this world, and turned away from the God of Abraham. So when Paul writes in v.10 "*we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*" Paul is saying, "*Now WE also are alive! We with YOU! And WE all are doing good works, following a new King.*" This is a totally different existence. How different? Carefully compare vv.1-2 with v.10 and we see our walk of the past was a walk of death in the realm of sin, but now our walk is a walk of life in the realm of a new creation, and we are following a merciful and loving God who has already mapped out everything ahead of time. Our Father really does have a plan and a purpose! That brings us to the heart of Paul's thinking. What Paul prayed in chapter 1 about Christ, and how Christ was raised and exalted by the power of God, he now says about us. He defines the great contrast between the walk in this present world and the walk of the follower of Christ. And it is all because of God. It starts and ends with Him.

**4 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 have to stop and consider this great turn in the passage—*But GOD...* NOT *“But YOU...”* or *“But WE...”*, BUT GOD! And then Paul uses the rest of v.4 to describe our God as “being, one who is always in His very nature, rich and abundant in mercy.” And He is so rich in mercy “because of the great love with which He loved us.” How great is this mercy? How much *DOES* He love us, and how much *HAS* He loved us? Paul says He loved us, “... even when *WE (all)* were dead in our trespasses”. We were *ALL* dead—both Jews and Gentiles—all of humanity, and no one is off the hook. It is our sin, the sin that lives in our very nature, and our sinful acts, that is the cause of our death because death is the penalty for sin. And the judge of sin is God Himself. The only way to fully grasp the mercy that God shows toward us is to see the depth of our own sin and for our minds to grasp the holiness of God, the power of God, and the justice of God. Meditate again on the story of Exodus and see the power of God in Egypt and His wrath is poured out on the mightiest nation in the world at that time.

The psalmist describes this in Ps 106:6-12 (GNB):

**6** *We have sinned as our ancestors did; we have been wicked and evil.*

**7** *Our ancestors in Egypt did not understand God's wonderful acts; they forgot the many times he showed them his love, and they rebelled against the Almighty at the Red Sea.*

**8 But he [GOD] saved them**, as he had promised, in order to show his great power. **9** *He gave a command to the Red Sea, and it dried up; he led his people across on dry land.* **10** *He saved them from those who hated them; he rescued them from their enemies.* **11** *But the water drowned their enemies; not one of them was left.* **12** *Then his people believed his promises and sang praises to him.*

The Psalmist, like Paul, says, “*But GOD!*” In the face of the sin and the rebellion of His own people, God *saved them*, and the entire Egyptian army was destroyed as they suffered the flood of God’s wrath! Do we deserve less? Does God ignore the penalty our sin demands? Is mercy simply God shrugging at our transgressions? Of course not! We are as sinful as any Egyptian who was at the Red Sea. But one day the flood of wrath fell on Jesus as He stayed on the Cross. That is where we find mercy. Our sin was judged and we were freed the moment we believed in Jesus. Like Moses, Jesus leads us through the flood of wrath and out the other side! I really like Tom Wright’s comment:

*“The main thing Paul wants to stress is the sheer, almost unbelievable, magnificent kindness of God..., God is rich in mercy; he loved us with a great love; his sheer grace has saved us; his grace is rich beyond all telling; he has lavished kindness upon us. Whenever anyone says that God is, after all, a bit stingy, or mean, or small-minded—look at these verses and think again.”<sup>1</sup>*

So then, after saying, “*But God*” after describing the total failure of man, Paul uses three verbs that describe HOW God has saved us by His grace, and Paul even makes a point to say, “*By Grace you have been saved.*” Notice the main verbs in vv.4-7: “*But God made us alive, and raised us up, and seated us.*” God did it all and He did it

*through Jesus, and in Jesus. We are made alive with Him, raised with Him, seated in the heavenly realm with Him. Without HIM we have nothing. We can do nothing, which is what Jesus told the Apostles the night before He died. "I am the vine and you are the branches." Jesus is the true source of our lives.*

Paul says that God directs His power toward us when we trust Him. That is the only way we can access it—by faith. As a result, we are raised and seated *with* His Son. We are exalted above every name that is named; we are seated with Him in this age and in the age to come. In other words, this is a permanent position. It has no end. It is eternal life! That is why Paul calls us saints!

But we cannot boast in our position! We have to be careful *NOT* to boast in it. If we even think we can take credit for any part of this power that works in us, the people of the world will sense it. They are skittish and suspicious of the claims of the Church; this promise of being chosen and having a claim on "*an eternal life*". The way we speak and the way we act can easily convey pride and arrogance that, sadly, is sometimes really in the Church. The charge of hypocrisy in the Church is valid at times. That is why Paul is making this very pointed reminder in vv.8-9 after describing the position we truly hold as a result of our trust in 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 a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" The salvation is because of the richness of God's mercy, not our work, nor even our desire. We were enslaved in a kingdom that is filled with darkness. We couldn't see God's kingdom. But while we were still dead we were made alive! So Paul will remind us later in this letter that we have to be careful *HOW* we speak of this. We have to "*speak the truth in, and with, an attitude of love*". We could add the attitudes of mercy and forgiveness to the attitude of love. The people still trapped in the old world do not need our judgment. They need to see that God, even though He is a holy God, wants to show them mercy. We have received this mercy ourselves.

Luke tells us about a day in the life of Jesus that really brings out what self-righteous boasting looks like, especially when compared to the mercy that both Jesus and the Father show to us who truly trust in God:

*One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." 41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said*

to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” 50 And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Luke 7:36-50 (ESV) <sup>2</sup>

As I read and meditate on this story I see myself as Simon rather than the woman. I really am more like him. So as I ponder that, I learn more about myself than is comfortable for me. I come to see that I have been forgiven for far more than I can admit. I can choose to admit that and ask God to change my heart so it is like the woman. Tim Keller likes to say, “We are all worse than we think we are—and yet we are more loved than we can ever imagine.” I really think Luke wants us to see that the woman knew the depth of Jesus love. She lavished him with her gifts and her tears because she had experienced the richness God’s grace. Luke does not tell us how or when that happened in her life. But he certainly is telling us about the effect! And it is all because of Jesus. I think that is what Paul means when he says, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” We are all special works of art. Our first work is to worship Jesus like this woman did, with our time and our wealth. The Father set out all of these other works for the Church ahead of time—the Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, her prayers and her priestly work in the world—and we all have our special place in His plan. Paul recognized that for himself. He tells us he is “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (1:1), “a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” (3:1) and “... though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8). God called Paul to preach to Gentiles and to love Gentiles. This defies all human logic. Gentiles and Jews are cultural and historical enemies, but God’s plan is to bring peace between them, because God’s plan is to break all barriers and to create one new race that will one day rule in His new creation. And that is where we will look next time ...

*God our Father, we praise your name! You provide all we need to live the redeemed life in this age. The power is there as you lavish us with your Grace. Yet we still often live as dead men. Please give us the heart of the woman who knelt at Jesus feet, so that we can know we are forgiven much, and more importantly, how much we are loved. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright “Paul For Everyone” Westminster John Knox Press; 2nd edition 2004 p.20

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.24 In reference to vv.8-10 Tom Wright asks, “What happens to people’s moral and spiritual lives if they don’t grasp the fact that our entire life, never mind our salvation, is God’s undeserved gift? If that sounds too abstract a question, a story which makes it very vivid and personal is found in Luke 7.36–50.” In his comments on Luke 7 he says, “...human beings appear, not as society has ‘constructed’ them, but as God sees them... The Pharisee has never come to terms with the depths of his own heart, and so doesn’t appreciate God’s generous love when it sits in person at his own table. For Luke, true faith is what happens when someone looks at Jesus and discovers God’s forgiveness; and the sign and proof of this faith is love.”