
¹ You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, 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, following the desires 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 to be our way of life.

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSV)

“Do you love me?” How often could people ask such a question, and in what context? Have you ever asked this question of anyone? Has anyone ever asked such a question from you.

At risk of caricaturing, one could say that it is not uncommon for a woman to see a look of uncertainty or fear on her ‘man’ when she asks this question: “Do you love me?” Of course, it’s not uncommon when a husband asks his wife “Do you love me?” that she responds, “What do you want?!”

In many ways everyone is seeking someone to ‘love them’. What this ‘love’ means, and how it may be manifested may be radically different from relationship to relationship (depending on life circumstances, and one’s definition of ‘love’). But deep down everyone wants some form of ‘connection’ to the world and people around them (even if it be a ‘connection’ by ‘distance’ – eg, a ‘hermit-monk’ whose association with others is by separation... After all, if you ‘love them’ you will also understand and respect a person’s appropriate request for time to be alone...).

Sometime, however, we find it difficult to ‘love others’. And sometimes we also find that this word ‘love’ is used as a weapon to ‘control people’ (eg: ‘That’s not a loving thing to do... that’s not a loving attitude’... And when words like these are used, they are sometimes done so to seek to control another person’s behaviour and actions).

But how are we to ‘love one another’? And what does it mean to ‘be loved’?

Today we shall reflect on the topic of love, and we do so also reflecting on the topic of sin. It is when we understand our sin that we may also see God’s great love for us all... And we do so with reference to some great words spoken

through the Apostle Paul: *“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”*

In reflecting on these words it is also important to remember that when the Apostle Paul wrote to the people at Ephesus, he was writing to a people who lived in a world of sin.

In terms of the background to our Bible reading it is helpful to remember that Ephesus was a large city (approx. 250,000 people). It was home to the temple of Artemis (a.k.a. Diana), the goddess of virginity and childbearing. The temple was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. Religion in Ephesus centered on the worship of Artemis. Many people thought that sacrifices to this goddess would bring fertility and “good sex.” This also meant that prostitution was rampant in Ephesians as a result.

Paul ministered in Ephesus for about 3 years, beginning around A.D. 53. Paul sent them a follow up letter seven years later around A.D. 60. However, unlike many of Paul’s other letters, Ephesus is not written in response to a list of problems sent to Paul. Rather, he wished to remind the people at Ephesus (and probably in the surrounding area) of the basis of faith, and what faith meant for everyday life.

And when Paul writes he is being realistic about the world we live in, and the effects of sin. Paul begins, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins.” When you are dead you cannot do much. When Paul was speaking about us ‘being dead’ this is a factual statement about our spiritual condition. We are ‘dead to God’. We are born without knowledge of a personal God. But just like the Knight who says ‘Just a flesh wound’ – whilst both arms are cut off – we cannot see our true condition.

Furthermore, Paul says, we ‘followed the world’. One translator (JB Phillips) has this passage read “we drifted along the stream of this world’s ideas of living”.

And so we are ‘lost’. It’s easy to ‘get lost’, isn’t it? Children in supermarkets are easily distracted. Adults become distracted also by this world’s concerns.

What does the Bible say about our human condition? Romans 3:23: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” That’s what this ‘lost’ is all about. When you told your neighbour ‘You ain’t perfect... well... none of us is perfect.

But here is the great ‘But God’! In the first part of Ephesians 2 Paul says ‘You ain’t perfect’. Sin, which is a real ‘flesh wound’ has got you. But there is the great “But God!” And Paul goes on to speak about it.

Here we have that great verse from Ephesians 2:8-9. “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.”

What does it mean to 'know this'? Often we think that if we can convince someone in their mind we think we can 'get them to believe'. Yes, a real faith *will* engage our intellect. However, it is another thing to engage the heart. James tells us (2:19) "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder"

The question is, do we know Jesus as God and respond to His grace?

But what is this 'grace' that we so often speak about?

Grace is a gift from God. You don't 'deserve' God. And grace is not a 'principle' or an 'idea' or a 'concept'. It is a person. We look for grace in Jesus. This is where grace comes from. Now remember who writes Ephesians. This is Paul who murdered Christians! And he says, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Grace is God's ultimate initiation. We are responders.

I once heard a person describe grace like this: Imagine you get an 'F' on your school report. It's one of those reports you have to get your parents to sign, and then return it to school. So you take it to dad and mum with fear and trembling. They open it. Then they give you a hug. And they take you out to your favourite restaurant. And after, they take you to a movie (and you can see any lame movie you want). And they tell you that they love being with their children. And then they get you ice-cream.

That's what God's grace is like to us. He took us to dinner. He gave us a feast. None of us deserve this. God rescued us. Jesus saved us. None of us deserve this, and none of us have done anything to contribute to this. It's like we're walking along a cliff top, and suddenly the track gives way, and we've overbalanced. But some snatches us back. Very often we like to elevate what we do in life. But God has snatched us back in Jesus. We are God's workmanship. We are His trophies. He lives in us.

So, what does this mean for us?

First of all, grace in Christ Jesus means we have *certainty in life*.

A while ago a book came out that spoke of God's amazing grace in Jesus. This book has sold millions. An older pastor asked me, 'Does this book mention baptism and communion?' The answer was 'No'. He asked, "How can it talk about grace".

Now, a Christian book can talk about grace without mentioning the sacraments. But the good thing about the sacraments is that in something seemingly so ordinary God does something amazing. We are not saved by 'being baptised' or 'going to communion' (as though these are works). We are saved by Jesus. But in these sacraments it's not about what we do; it's about what Jesus does. And we know we have certainty in life (certainty of forgiveness, certainty of purpose, certainty of eternal life and our place in God's kingdom) all because of Jesus.

Secondly, *God's grace in Christ Jesus means we have confidence in life*. Grace isn't a little prayer we say before receiving a meal; it's a way to live. What gives abiding joy for every day of this life, if not the love of God? What keeps you going? Where would we be without Jesus? Grace is more than a word; it's a way of life.

Finally, *grace means a new way of living*. Paul says, "For you are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life". God's workmanship, created to do good works – see Eph.4ff. However, a 'new way of living' is not about what we do (although this is not unimportant). It is, primarily, about remembering whose we are. There is a wonderful acronym from 'Grace': "God's Riches At Christ's Expense". God's vision for the church is to show "God's Riches At Christ's Expense". And this is not about 'preaching a principle about Jesus". This is about rejoicing in who you are: a new creation in Christ Jesus, forgiven fully and freely. You are a person who can be honest to God, and honest to one another in Christ Jesus.

At the beginning of our meditation this day I said I wished to address the topic of 'sin' and 'love'. Sin *is* serious stuff. Sin is so serious that Christ suffered and died on the cross. The Apostle Paul was under no illusion about our world. He began by speaking about sin and death and wrath. Yet he refused also to despair because he believed in Jesus. He *knew* the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Here is an interesting thing in the Bible... Have you ever noticed that Jesus never said the word "grace"? Here's something else Jesus never said to any individual: "I love you." Jesus may not have said it but He sure showed it. His selfless sacrifice on the cross was the greatest demonstration of love the world has ever seen.

On the cross He wrapped Jesus arms around the world and gave us a big "I love you." It is exactly like that with grace. He may not have said it, but He showed it big time. "Do you love me?" To that question our Lord Jesus has said a powerful "Yes". What a wonderful gift of life and love you have in Jesus. Amazing Grace! Amen!