

A Sermon  
Ephesians 2:1-22  
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Ephesians chapter 2 is about the transforming power of the grace of God and the Cross of Christ.

At the end of chapter 1 Paul prays that his readers will know 'the incomparably great power of God for those who believe'. But his readers may have wondered about God's great power. They might have felt rather lonely, rather unsure of themselves. They were isolated pockets of believers. They were not Jews. They were not Gentiles. They were a strange new thing - followers of a crucified Messiah, not numerous or powerful or wealthy. They may have wondered about God's great power.

And we might wonder about God's power. We wonder what will set the world to right. What will cure our problems of poverty and war and famine; of corruption in government and corruption in business; of exploitation and injustice?

We have gathered this week in Kenya as Anglican Christians from all over the world - a global Anglican conference, because we are convinced that the power that will set the world to right is the power of the Gospel; we are convinced that Jesus is the world's King, that he will set the world to right, and make a new Creation at the time of his choosing where there will be no more war or famine or crying or pain. In the meantime those who are his show forth his Kingship in their ordinary, day to day lives - lives of love and truth and grace and reconciliation and blessing others. We spend our time busy in the work that he left us, the work of making disciples. We pursue that work and live such lives because we have encountered in Jesus a power that transforms the world, one life at a time.

In ch 2, Paul continues to explain how God's power is at work in the world. Let me orient you to the chapter. Look with me at the beginning of chapter 2; you will see that Paul is speaking to his mainly Gentile Christian listeners and he says to them (v1) *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*

Now jump to the end of the passage and still speaking to the same group of people Paul says (v22) *In Christ, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Can you see the extraordinary transformation that Paul is describing? The people to whom he is speaking were once 'dead in sin', but now have become 'the dwelling of God', the place where God dwells by his Spirit. Do you see what an extraordinary change has come about in this group of people? And the question is, how did this happen?

Did they reform themselves? Did they turn over a new leaf? Did they undertake a twelve step program to a better you? Or did they get religion? Did they start going to church and saying their prayers and receiving communion? How did they change from being 'dead in sin' to being 'the dwelling place of God'?

It was nothing they did themselves. Look at the middle of v 15 (*Jesus'*) *purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two.*

No - they did not change from being dead in sin to being the dwelling of God, by anything that they did. It was Jesus who did something for them and in them and to them. Here's the theme of this chapter. *Jesus is God's power to make a new humanity.*

The chapter falls into two halves, v1-10 and v11-22. In the first half of the chapter Paul focusses on relationship with God - the vertical relationship. In the second half of the chapter Paul focusses on relationship between people - the horizontal relationship. In the first half, the change that comes about through God's power is that the 'dead in sin' (v1) are 'made alive' (v5). In the second half the change that comes about through God's power is that those who were 'far away' are 'brought near' (v13).

I'm calling v1-10 The Power of God's Grace and the second half v 11-22 The Power of Christ's Cross. And in both halves, we find this pattern in what Paul has to say. He gives us a picture of the desperate past, the human plight of his readers before they became Christian - The Plight of their Past. Then he gives a description of the great power that God exerts that changes their situation - God's Great Power. Finally, he describes the immense privilege of their new situation - Their Privileged Present. Three p's - Plight, Power, Privilege.

## **1. The Power of God's Grace v 1-10**

### **The Plight of their Past v1-3**

I can't remember how old I was when I discovered that the stars are always there. When you are a child you think that the sun wakes up at the same time you do; and that the stars come out at night when you go to bed. But of course, when you grow up a little you learn that the stars are there all the time. I think I was about 22. It's only when the earth revolves on its axis so that your half of the planet is shaded from the sun, that the stars, that were there all the time begin their magnificent, illuminated display. It's only when the sky goes black that you can see the glory of the shining stars.

The apostle Paul wants his readers to be stunned by the grace and love and mercy of God. So he reminds them of the black night sky of their spiritual condition before they knew Christ as Lord.

v1-3

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins .....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.....gratifying the cravings of the flesh and following its desires and thoughts.....we were by nature deserving of wrath.*

It is a devastating picture of the human condition. Dead in sin; disobedient; deserving of wrath. A triple bondage - followers of the ways of the world; subjects of a malevolent spiritual power; slaves of desire and cravings. See it? The world, the flesh and the devil. The world and its ways -

corrupted power, insatiable greed, ruthless exploitation. The flesh - the inner voices of lust and envy and pride. The devil - our enemy, the Father of lies, the accuser.

Corrupt, captive, condemned. A picture of utter spiritual incapacity. Not literally dead of course spiritually dead, disobedient and facing God's just judgement. Paul describes his Gentile hearers before they knew Christ, but he is quick to add - *all of us lived this way*. He is describing the universal condition of all people everywhere. By nature and choice, spiritually dead, disobedient, deserving God's wrath.

Paul has prayed in ch 1 that his readers would know God better, and in ch 2 he gives them a spiritual diagnosis so that they will know themselves better. No one can be a disciple of Jesus unless they grapple with the grim reality of our desperate plight before God. We are guilty. We are dead.

If we are spiritually dead then immediately we can affirm three propositions. First, every religion or ideology that says to humans, 'you must try harder', 'pray more', 'do better'; 'you must walk the eight-fold Path'; 'you must build on the five pillars'; 'you must observe the 634 commands'; 'you must visualize your best self' or 'seek connection with the divine goddess or wild man within' - every religion or ideology that commands such works must fail. Dead men and women do no works!

Second, any understanding of the human condition that ignores the powerful effects of sin will be inadequate. Adam Smith knew something about the human condition - the power of greed. Karl Marx knew something - the heart of injustice. Freud knew something - the inner struggle. But they are all inadequate because they do not see the fatal wound of sin.

Third, if we are dead, we do not need a doctor. We need a resurrection.

That's the human plight. Dead in sin, enslaved to the devil and desire, deserving God's wrath. Now, see the power of God's Grace.

## **The Power of God's Grace v4**

*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions - it is by grace you have been saved.*

But God. The story of every Christian is the story of a powerful intervention by a gracious God. The Christian story is not a story of moral self-improvement or mental discipline or the cultivation of religious habits or tastes. We are not saved by the quality of our character or the purity of our devotion or the frequency of our confession or the diligence of our charity. No. We were dead. And God made us alive.

Why? Not because of us. He saved us because of his own nature. Out of his great love and mercy, by grace. Not because of our works but out of his kindness. Grace has several synonyms, words that mean the same thing in this passage, and you can see them peppered through these verses v4 love, v 4 mercy, v 5 grace, v 7 the riches of his grace, v7 kindness, v 8 grace, v 8 gift. God's unmerited kindness, his mercy, love and gift.

Grace is not a substance, not a magic potion or fairy dust. No, God's grace has flesh; God's grace is incarnate. Verse 5 God made us alive *with Christ*, v6 we have been raised and seated *with Christ*, v7 God expressed his kindness to us *in Christ Jesus*. We know nothing of God's grace apart from Christ, it is only 'with Christ' and 'in Christ' that we know God's grace. That is why there is no salvation outside of Christ, that is why salvation is not from us but a gift of God; that is why salvation is not by works so that no one can boast.

We are saved by the power of God's grace not by works; by what God does not by what we do, because God helps the helpless and the hopeless not those who help themselves; not by our free will but by the free grace of God, not because we showed our worthiness but while we were dead in transgression.

And the faith that unites us to Christ and all that God has done in Christ - even that is not a work but a gift, not a deserving but a receiving. Faith is no boast; faith is but an empty hand. God does not reward the faith he sees; our faith receives what God has done.

Grace not works, therefore there is no room for self-congratulation; all the praise belongs to God.

Grace not works therefore there is no room for self-righteousness but rather humility.

Grace not works therefore there is no room for judgmentalism, but rather compassion.

Grace not works therefore there is no uncertainty but full assurance - 'Bold I approach the eternal throne!' Wesley says, 'and claim the crown through Christ my own!'

Grace not works therefore there is no guilt but joy and thanksgiving - full forgiveness is ours through him who died and rose again!

Between before and after, between dead in sin and alive in Christ, is no program, no ritual, no obedience, no prayer, no doctrine – between dead and alive is the love of God in Jesus Christ and that is all.

If we get this wrong, we get our devotion wrong because we will fear God or hate him or shrink God and try to buy him off or despair at his impossible standards instead of rejoicing in the God who has saved us out of the great love with which he loved us.

We will get our evangelism wrong because we will preach moralism and ritualism instead of truth and grace, or resort to trickery or false promises rather than rely on God to convict by the gospel, and compel by the gospel and comfort by the gospel.

We will get our discipleship wrong because we will be motivated by guilt or fear or pride instead of thanksgiving and hope.

We will get our service wrong because we will resent it as a chore instead of rejoicing in it as a privilege or we will think that what we do for God puts God in our debt or pays our debt to him instead of recognizing that what we do for God is his gift to us.

We will get our relationships wrong because we will think of ourselves as better than some whom we will despise or worse than others whom we will envy, instead of seeing that we are all sinners and rebels and beggars who have been wondrously forgiven, adopted and welcomed by grace. Because of the intervention of God in his powerful loving grace the Ephesian Christians are now in a magnificently privileged position.

### **Their Privileged Present v10**

*For we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to walk in.*

Those who were dead in sin have been made alive, re-created a new creation, God's handiwork or some translations say, God's masterpiece. And for this newly created, newly made alive masterpiece - there are works to walk in. In the days ahead we will no doubt hear about those works - speaking the truth in love, building up the body of Christ, putting off the old clothes of sexual immorality and greed and foolish talk and putting on the new robe of righteousness and holiness; being filled with the Spirit in relationships of mutual submission and self-giving service; putting on the armour of God to take our stand against the enemy. All works prepared for us to walk in.

But there is a work of God's new humanity here in this passage. It's in v7, God by his grace raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms *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.*

Here is the great privilege of the redeemed people of God - made alive, raised and seated with Christ, we are to display before the universe, before the powers and authorities in the spiritual world and all creation the incomparable riches of his grace. As God demonstrated his incomparable *power* in raising Jesus from the dead (1:19), in raising us he demonstrates his incomparable *grace*.

What God has done for Jesus - raising him, seating him in glory, exalting him above every spiritual power - what God has already done in Jesus he has also done for us, although we do not yet experience it. Like a parent who enrolls their child in an exclusive school the moment they are

born, their place is secure and the child's name in the enrollment book is a display of their parents' wealth and influence and foresight.

The idea here is that the natural and spiritual world will look on those whom God has saved and praise him for his kindness. I often think that when the new creation comes I'm going to meet a whole lot of people and say to them, "Didn't expect to see you here!", and I suppose they'll say the same about me! But Paul's idea is that the rulers and powers and authorities in the spiritual realm, look upon the saved sinners who have become God's masterpiece and gasp! You? You? He has raised *you* and seated *you* with Christ? You belong to *him* - Holy Holy Holy, Almighty, Eternal, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Everlasting - you belong to *him*? Praise his glorious grace! Praise his name! Praise the incomparable riches of his grace!

I said that the theme of this chapter is that Jesus is God's power to make a new humanity. In the first ten verses we see the power of God's grace in Jesus - by which he saves and seats with Christ those who were dead, enslaved and condemned, displaying in them the riches of his grace for all time. In the second half of the chapter Paul shows how the power to make a new humanity is the power of the Cross of Christ.

Again Paul employs the pattern of Plight, Power, Privilege.

## **2. The Power of Christ's Cross v11-22**

### **The Plight of their Past v11-12**

In the first half of the chapter, Paul has painted a picture of the plight of all humanity. But here he begins by drawing attention to the particular plight of his Gentile readers before they came to Christ.

v11 *Remember you Gentiles* v12 *remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.*

Now that's a picture of alienation isn't it? There are two kinds of isolation that Paul picks up on. People isolated from each other and people isolated from God. The second kind of isolation was the direct result of the first. Because the Gentiles had no contact with the Jews – it meant they had no contact with God. They had religion of course - they had priests and rituals and festivals but they had no contact with God. The Bible is not at all sentimental about human religion. Human religion at best expresses the desire to know God, at worst it expresses the desire to suppress God – but in neither case does it express knowledge of God. They were without hope and without God in the world.

God's purpose according to 1v10 is to unite all things under heaven and earth under his Son, but here is the great sweep of humanity - the gentile race - excluded from the people of God - stateless, friendless, hopeless and godless - as one commentator puts it. God's purpose is to create one new humanity. By what power could he do that?

### **The Power of Christ's Cross v13-18**

For the second time in the chapter there is a decisive turning point - *But now*. Verse 4, 'But God', v 13 'But now'. Once you were excluded from Christ, v 13 *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

Notice that what is only implied in the first half of the chapter is made explicit in the second half. It is the *blood of Christ* that is God's power to bring about the new humanity. In v 15 it is *in his flesh* that the law is set aside; in v 16 it is *through the Cross* that Jesus reconciles people to God. The death of Jesus is God's power to bring about the peace that reconciles Jew and Gentile and that reconciles both to God in one new humanity. Let's look at it more closely.

How does he do this?

v 14 *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.*

Paul says that Jesus ‘destroys the dividing wall of hostility’ and ‘sets aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations’. I think both phrases refer to the same thing. The holy law of God that marked out the Jewish people as distinct and separate and privileged above all the other people of the world had become a wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile.

The ancient historian Josephus records that in the Temple, the wall separating the Court of the Nations from the Court of Israel carried a sign that read “Any non-Jew found beyond this point will have only himself to blame for his death”. So the law stood as a wall of separation between Jew and Gentile, alienated from each other.

But the law which condemned the immorality and idolatry and injustice of the Gentiles condemned the very same things in God’s own people, the Jews. The law that separated Jew and Gentile condemned Israel as much as it condemned the Gentiles who did not have the law. But the Cross changes all that.

When Jesus died on the cross he did away with the law’s division between clean and unclean - he took all the world’s uncleanness into himself and did away with it - so that the unclean might be made clean through faith in him. When Jesus died on the cross, he made the one full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world that had only been foreshadowed in the ancient sacrificial system of the law. Now, there was full atonement by the blood of the perfect sacrifice, not of bulls and goats but of the sinless Son of God, the suffering Servant of the Lord. When Jesus died on the cross, the law’s stipulated penalty was paid, a ransom for many. In his flesh on the cross, he set aside the regulations and commands of the law - uncleanness done away with, atonement achieved, penalty paid.

Now, holiness, cleanness is not a matter of keeping the law, but of faith in Christ. Whoever is in Christ is clean, washed, set apart - by faith in Christ, united to him. Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. What Christ unites to himself, he unites to each other. The law’s demand for separation is done away with in the death of Christ. Likewise, forgiveness of sin is no longer a matter of Temple and priesthood and sacrifice of animals, now it is the blood of Christ that atones

and anyone united to Christ by faith is sprinkled clean by his blood. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. Those saved by the same blood of Christ are united to one another by his blood.

Peace with God, peace with each other through the Cross.

When I was a curate at a parish in Australia's capital - not Sydney, not Melbourne but Canberra (don't worry, no one's heard of it) - there was a Sri Lankan Tamil Christian fellowship and a Sri Lankan Singhalese Christian fellowship. One year, they decided to have a camp together. They had never done it before. And over dinner, I was told by someone who was there, for the first time stories were shared and brothers and sisters in Christ who had been divided by race and language and history and war, embraced each other in repentance, forgiveness and love. And there were tears and there was laughter and there was prayer.

And that must be right, mustn't it? Because the point at which the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile is most poignantly and powerfully expressed is in the fellowship of prayer. *v18 For through Jesus we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

The Cross destroys the wall of hostility. The Cross reconciles people to God and to each other. The Cross provides access to the Father. And Jesus' death does not merely create forgiven humans, but *one new humanity*. Not the church replacing Israel. Not Gentiles becoming Jews. New creatures, a third race beyond Jew and Gentile - the church of God, Christians. Children of the same heavenly Father, who approach on the basis of the blood of the same Lord, and who have access to the Father by the same Spirit. The power of Christ's Cross to break down the wall of hostility, to replace enmity with peace, to create one new humanity, to provide access to the Father by one Spirit.

### **Their Privileged Present v 19-22**

As a result of the power of the Cross, their plight is completely reversed.

*v19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*

*with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Jesus destroys the wall of hostility and builds a dwelling for God by building in his people. Once they were foreigners, now they are citizens. More than that, they are not merely citizens, they are part of the family, members of God's household. More than that, they are not merely family members, they are the bricks and mortar in a building of which Jesus is the most important stone and the teaching of the apostles and the prophets about Jesus is the essential foundation. More than that, the building of which they are part is a temple to the Lord, a temple being built by Jesus to be the dwelling place of God by his Spirit. The Church of God - the dwelling place of the Holy Trinity.

You see the amazing dignity and privilege of membership of God's people. God's church is not a building, it is a people. A people reconciled to God and reconciled to each other through the death of Jesus.

Two things to finish with.

How wonderful that we are gathered here this week. Brothers and sisters from thirty nations, of diverse language, culture, history, music, food. We come from many and diverse backgrounds and walks of life - but we have just one story. Just one Father, just one Lord, just one Spirit. Just one Cross by which we have been reconciled to God, just one testimony of the apostles and the prophets which is the foundation of the church.

If God is building his people *in*, what are we doing? There must be no walls between us. There must be welcome; there must be reconciliation; there must be fellowship in prayer and truth.

And second, the Lord said 'make disciples and teach them to obey all that I have commanded you'. All that the Lord has commanded *through his apostles and prophets*. Our Anglican communion is threatened by those who abandon the Cross, abandon grace, abandon the foundation of the apostles

and the prophets which we have received in Scripture. But we cannot abandon the foundation of the apostles and prophets without abandoning the Lord. Without the Cross as prophet and apostle understood and proclaimed it there is no peace with God; without the Cross there is no grace of God; without the Cross there is no gospel to proclaim; without the Cross there is no power to transform; without the Cross there is no Spirit who dwells within. Without the Cross there is no hope.

The dwelling place of God must be a place built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with the Lord Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

We are the Body of Christ. His Spirit is with us. The Temple Jesus builds is not a building, it is us - people secure and rejoicing in the grace of God. People reconciled by the Cross; people made alive with Christ; people built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit; people seated with Christ that we may display the incomparable riches of his grace.

Amen. Praise the Lord.