

November 20 Lesson 12 (NIV)

We Are God's Handiwork

Devotional Reading: 1 Timothy 2:1-8

Background Scripture: Acts 19; Ephesians 2; Revelation 2:1-7

Ephesians 2:1-10

¹ As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² 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. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ 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. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Key Text

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

God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 3: We Are God's Artwork

Lessons 10-13

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How to Say It

EphesiansEe-fee-zhunz.

Gentiles/en-tiles.

Introduction

A. Leaving Hospice

A hospice is a wonderful but sobering place. For terminally ill patients, today's hospice facilities provide care that brings comfort for the patient and the patient's family and friends. But no ill person looks forward to going to hospice, for few patients leave the hospice alive.

Because hospice patients expect death, the few who are discharged describe the experience with amazement and words like, "I was ready to die, but here I am alive. It is like I *was* dead and now I'm resurrected or something. I guess God has more for me to do."

"From death to life" is how in our text Paul describes becoming a Christian. The old life was really death, but the new life is real life, a fundamentally different existence. And it is really true that God made us alive in him because he has work for us to do.

B. Lesson Context

Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians as a prisoner of the Roman Empire (see Ephesians 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; also Lesson Context of lesson 10). If he wrote during his imprisonment in Rome mentioned in Acts 28:30–31, then he was living in his own rented house and could receive visitors, both his fellow Christian workers and those interested in hearing about Jesus. He was not in a dark dungeon, as we might imagine a prisoner to be.

However, his situation still was not pleasant. Being a prisoner meant he could not move about as he pleased. It meant that he faced the threat of a judgment against him that could even mean his execution. Confinement, worry, shame—these were his experience.

But Paul's prison letters do not suggest that the misery of Paul's condition dictated his outlook. Even as a prisoner, Paul repeatedly emphasized that Christians have an exalted place in God's plan. Being a prisoner might seem like death, but Paul could only speak of being *raised* from the dead.

Paul's readers, though not prisoners, were also in a difficult position. Their new faith put them at odds with the world around them. Many of their familiar relationships had been cut off: Christians of Jewish background were sometimes no longer welcome in the synagogue; Christians of Gentile background were no longer to participate in the worship rites of paganism. Each group was under additional scorn for associating with the other. Christians were suspected of wanting to undermine the foundations of their communities.

Paul's message to the Ephesians emphasizes a different perspective, the perspective of God. From God's throne, Christians are not downtrodden but victorious. They are not rebels against the community but God's agents of renewal for the world. Despite rejection by neighbors or even those in authority, Christians—then and now—are the grateful recipients of everything God has done. We're already experiencing God's eternal blessings and anticipating a still greater future when Christ returns. We live together as God's temple (Ephesians 2:11–22). And Paul himself, proclaiming the gospel despite his confinement, exemplified what the lives of his audience were truly like (3:1–19).

But this status was not something they deserved or had earned. The work was all God's. They needed God's work in Christ to rescue them from the helpless state of death and make them alive to all that God had for them.

I. Dead in Sin (Ephesians 2:1–3)

A. Living for the Enemy (vv. 1–2)

1. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,

Ephesians 1:18–23 (see lesson 11) spoke forcefully of Jesus' resurrection. With the opening *as for you* here, Paul moves from God's display of power in Christ to the results for humanity. God has also given us a resurrection from death (compare Colossians 2:13).

The immediate result of this transaction is not immunity to physical death (such death is overcome later; see 1 Corinthians 15). Rather, the new life at issue in the passage before us is spiritual in nature. Spiritual death is a consequence of our *transgressions and sins*.

Only here and in Romans 5:20–21 do the Greek nouns behind this phrase occur in such proximity to one another. It's as if Paul was making sure the Ephesians didn't miss the point: they were guilty of rebellion against God, deserving of death. Death is the consequence of sin (Romans 6:23).

To be a sinner is to be spiritually dead: without true life, without connection to God, without hope. And to die in one's sins is to be eternally separated from the Lord, with no hope of life

following death. We may not want to admit it, but we are committing spiritual suicide when we sin. Those having been made alive in Christ should entertain no longing for that previous state.

2. 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.

Before coming to faith in Christ, Paul's readers lived under the sway of the trends and influences of a world in rebellion against God. Though this might have felt like freedom, it certainly was not. Before Christ they actually were in bondage to three closely related influences.

Before they came to love and submit to Christ, Paul's readers may have believed themselves to be free. But such was not the case. First, they had *followed the ways of this world*. That means they had acted as if God's standards for living were not valid. Today we still hear voices that call us to selfish sin, to moral failure, and to dishonesty. The world wants to direct us by its standards. If we let it, we are neither free nor godly.

Second, Paul connected this with serving *the ruler of the kingdom of the air*. Paul and his readers were acutely aware of the evil influences that attacked them. The prince of these spiritual forces of evil is unnamed here but corresponds with the devil later (Ephesians 6:11–12). The spiritual beings who are in rebellion against God are not our friends, but seek to destroy us and keep us far from fellowship with the Lord. The phrase *of the air* does not refer to a specific location, but to the spiritual nature of this evil. The letter to the Ephesians addresses this reality more than any other writing of Paul.

Even so, Paul was confident that Jesus has authority (and therefore victory) over all the spiritual forces that are in rebellion against God (see Ephesians 1:21; lesson 11). But this is an ongoing battle (see 6:12). This leads to Paul's third element.

B. Ensnared by Selfishness (v. 3)

3a. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

The third element that promotes sin lies within us. *All of us* (Paul includes himself) had been driven *at one time* by personal *cravings of our flesh* and *its desires and thoughts*. If one's body indicates that something feels good, the person may do it despite moral consequences. We can blame our sinfulness on our bodily desires. But the problem begins deep inside us, in how we think and what we want.

3b. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Paul's summary of that former life includes the fact that he and his readers had been *like the rest*. The characterization of unbelievers as *by nature deserving of wrath* is quite striking (compare Ephesians 5:6). We should note that it is not just pagan Gentiles who deserve God's wrath. Jews outside of Christ do not get a pass. Without Christ they too are children of wrath.

Paul's use of the word *nature* indicates something fundamental about us. As a result of our inherent tendency to sin, "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). We need not debate the possibility of living a perfect life and thereby earning our salvation. Although that is the standard (Matthew 5:48), it does not happen. It *will not* happen.

Such was our former life: infatuated by the sinful world, beset by temptations from the evil one, and controlled by out-of-control passion for the forbidden fruits desired by body and mind.

When drawn to the influences of the world and the devil, people mired in sinful desires think themselves to be in control, but they are not. They are slaves to passion and lust.

II. Alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4–10)

A. Loved by God (vv. 4–7)

4. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,

Having characterized one's pre-Christian past as consisting of infatuation with worldly influences, devil-driven disobedience, and indulgence in sinful passions, Paul moved the discussion to his readers' future life. This shift is signaled by movement from the "as for you" (Ephesians 2:1, above) to the *but ... God* of the verse before us.

If God had no wrath, the world would have no justice. But if God had no mercy, the world would have no hope. Left to ourselves, we are rebels deserving of ruin and judgment, of death and all that it entails. But thanks be to God, we are not left to ourselves. God is not merely merciful, but *is rich in mercy*, just as he is rich in grace (Ephesians 1:7; see lesson 10). Because of God's infinite wisdom, utter righteousness, and richness of grace, his eternal plan is to be merciful through the self-sacrificial work of Christ. God's justice is satisfied by Christ's righteous life and self-sacrificial death, the innocent Lord himself willingly taking the place of the guilty. By this amazing means, God can be both righteous and gracious, both just and merciful (Romans 3:25–26).

Any hope for us must begin with God's mercy and love. Even while deserving God's wrath, people still bear his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26–27). God has gone to great effort to save his lost image-bearers (Luke 19:10; etc.).

Paul is given to large statements when it comes to the nature of God. We see a great example in the description here of God's attribute of being rich in mercy (compare Romans 2:4; also Ephesians 2:7, below). Paul expands on this imagery by describing God's mercy as a *great love for us*. Paul used repetition for emphasis. He was barely able to contain his excitement! God spends his inexhaustible supply of mercy on us freely and lovingly. "His love endures forever" is the repeated refrain of Psalms 118 and 136.

5. made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Life before Christ was one of being *dead in transgressions*. But as Christ has been raised from death to resurrected life, so too are we *made ... alive* (also Colossians 2:13). When through faith we are joined with Christ, we are joined in his resurrection. That means we are already transferred from death to life. But it also promises a resurrection to come (1 Corinthians 15:20–26). Resurrection life is both present and future. Salvation is both present and future.

Setting the phrase *it is by grace you have been saved* may lead us to believe that this affirmation is somehow secondary to the thought at hand. But what is mentioned so briefly here serves two purposes: (1) it anticipates a fuller explanation of salvation by grace a bit later; and (2) it helps paint the larger picture of God's attitude toward his wayward children as his grace is considered alongside his mercy and love.

6. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

Our spiritual resurrection from the death of sin is followed by an “ascension.” Christ’s story is now our story; Christ’s life is our life. Christ ascended to Heaven after his resurrection (Luke 24:50–51; Acts 1:1–9; etc.); and following our resurrection from spiritual death, we are positioned *in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus* (compare Colossians 3:1–3). By God’s grace we share Christ’s victory and are agents of Christ’s rule. Having front-row seats in the glorious light of the presence of Christ and his victories means we no longer fear the spiritual darkness.

7. 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.

Paul gives an eternal reason for God’s rescue of sinners from spiritual death: that we might serve as a demonstration of his marvelous grace forever. The era that begins with salvation through faith in Christ is not an intermediate stage in God’s plan. Rather, it is for all time, a plan for *the coming ages*. Again, Paul pictures God’s grace as inexhaustible *riches*. To this is added the element of God’s kindness, a word that implies essential goodness (compare Romans 2:4). *His grace, expressed in his kindness* is not God’s response to anything meritorious we have done; rather, it is an offer that should draw a response from *us*.

B. Saved by Grace (vv. 8–9)

8a. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith

The concept of *by grace you have been saved*, introduced in Ephesians 2:5 (above), is now explored in greater depth. Salvation by grace expects and requires a response. The salvation God offers is of no effect unless accepted *through faith* on the part of the one who is dead in sins. Faith is often defined as “assent plus trust.” In other words, assent is accepting the gospel facts as true. Trust, on the other hand, is surrendering control of one’s life to Jesus on the basis of who he is and what he has done (John 3:16; Acts 10:43; 16:31; 1 Timothy 1:16).

8b.—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

A technical issue of the original Greek must be considered, an issue that is not apparent in our English translation. Every Greek noun and pronoun has a grammatical gender: either masculine, feminine, or neuter. So the gender of one or both pronouns *this* and *it* in verse 8b here must match the gender of one or both nouns *grace* and *faith* in verse 8a to determine the antecedent.

But there is no match. The nouns are both feminine, while the pronoun *this* is neuter. The pronoun *it* does not actually exist in the Greek text; it has been supplied in English for smooth reading.

We conclude, then, *this is not from yourselves* is not referring to any one particular element of verse 8a, but to God’s system of salvation as a whole. Salvation is a gift; it cannot be earned. We are not partners with God in bringing salvation. We are recipients of this rich *gift of God*.

9. not by works, so that no one can boast.

If salvation resulted from our own efforts, we could be justifiably proud. Paul knows well the danger here. Before he met Christ, Paul's seemingly spotless life was a source of pride to him, evidence of his moral superiority (see Philippians 3:4–6).

But there are no *works*, no actions we can take, that make us worthy of being self-excused from our sins. The best among us still have lapses and failures; we still yield to self-centeredness and gratification of lusts. We have no room for boasting, only for humility.

C. Prepared for Work (v. 10)

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

In the spiritual world of righteousness, there is no such thing as a self-made woman or man. Our spiritual resurrection is *God's handiwork*. We are the very people whom God has made—his deliberate, artful product.

Our new life has purpose, and this is part of God's design. We have been rescued from spiritual destruction so that we might be instruments of *good works*. Yet we must realize that living the life that pleases God is not how we are saved. Good works are not a payment for our salvation, nor are they the condition of our receiving the gift. The gift is free. But the effect of the gift is transformation. Though the struggle against "the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Ephesians 2:2, above) will continue, in Christ we have new motivation to serve and obey. And through God's Holy Spirit, we have new power to do so. As our sin made the old creation spin toward destruction, so by God's grace our new creation sets us on a course to do God's will on earth "as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Our aim becomes bringing our lives into line with the gift we have received, so that we reflect our new identity as God's people (Ephesians 4:1).

Conclusion

A. Reacting to the Call

If we are new to faith, we may feel overmatched by our calling. How can we measure up to expectations? How can we possibly overcome all the wrong in our lives? Paul reminds us to put our focus not on our inadequacy but on Christ's abundance. In Christ God has done everything for us. Forgiveness is full, and his power is sufficient. We need only continue to receive and trust, doing moment by moment what the Spirit directs and enables.

If we have followed Christ for a long time, we may fall into a habit of thinking we deserve any good things or benefits we have. Paul reminds us that our best was never good enough; that we stand with Christ by *his* action, not ours; and that whatever is good in our lives is now the result of freely receiving God's gift.

And if we are still considering faith in Christ, Paul gives us a powerful introduction to what God offers us. God has done all for us. But as we receive his gift, we will be forever different, set on a path to become what God, the good God of grace and mercy, has intended for us since before the beginning.

B. Prayer

O God, your mercy is everlasting, and your truth endures through the ages. May we receive your gracious gift afresh. And may we, as your handiwork, live lives that fit the richness of your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

We live now and forever by accepting God's gift through Christ's victory.¹
