

# Alive in Christ

## Ephesians 2:1-10

<sup>1</sup> You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> 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.

Our scripture's emphasis is on "grace" and "faith:" the total transformation of the believer, and the emphasis that it is all the "gift of God." Embedded in this passage is a sense that the resurrected reality promised to the Christian is already realized, and a conception of salvation, which is complete and total.

The three features of our passage are sin, Satan, and self. Sins of our day, ones we hear of in the daily news: Powers can haunt us personally in substance addiction or in the vast, perpetual war economy. The powers: school and church shootings, domestic violence/rape, thief/robbery, carjacking, home invasion, bribery, bullying, identity thief, addiction to gambling, racism, classism, sexism, injustice...and the list goes on. The variety of the powers' forms may be different in different communities, but all these lead to a state of "death" due to sin. Egotism and selfish preoccupation are both so damaging to our being that our spirit is not alive to God and to love. Our actions are so crippling that our God-intended humanity is dead.

The second feature is Satan. The "ruler of the power of the air" (v. 2) was found in the classic Greek-influenced cosmology of the period in which our scripture was written. The space between the moon and the earth, the Greeks believed, was dominated by demonic activity (according to some writers, for example, Philo, these demons included both benign and evil beings), operating in the arena where the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire were mixed.

Whether we believe that the force of evil manipulates human or we understand the devil as a major influence on the psychotic. Evil is any external agency that enslaves us. Evil is those cosmological forces that are controlling people—various addictions or psychological damages from childhood that might still enslave a person, or unjust social realities that do the same thing.

The result of all this is the third feature: a damaged self. "All of us once lived ... in the passions of our flesh" (v. 3) and were "following the desires of flesh and senses." The point is that we were controlled. We were little more than animals, living by crude and base instinct, in a semi dead state.

This semi dead state was never how we were intended to be. The great privilege of being human was never meant to be reduced to a state of manipulated control by forces outside our control. We were made for greater things. "But God, who is rich in mercy." And God sees all this even when we are dishonoring the gift of creation by our self-absorbed egotism. God's vehicle to bring about the transformation is the work of Christ. The work is accomplished. We participate in the resurrection now, and are invited to witness to the gift of grace that we have received.

For the author the emphasis in this passage is on the "status shift." We have gone from being agents manipulated by numerous forces around us to being rulers with Christ Jesus. Where the "prince of the air" might control the atmosphere, the Christian is sitting "in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." The hierarchy is

deliberate. Our position “trumps” the position of those evil forces that oppressed us "before," when we were under their tyranny.

There is a delightful confidence about our transformed state radiating through this passage. We are already participating in the promise of the eschaton (the end of the age). It is already a certainty in our lives. There is no danger of our salvation being at peril or being lost by our subsequent actions.

The agent of this dramatic change is **God**. God gets all the credit. We did not deserve the love while we lived life wallowing in our self-preoccupation, being manipulated by the forces around us (v. 5). God provides the agent of our transformation. We are not responsible for the dramatic miracle made possible by Christ's resurrection (v. 6). Nor can we take any credit for the role we will play as witnesses to the kindness shown to us in the ages to come. We are recipients of a remarkable gift from God—the gift of absolutely everything. The goal is a transformed life (one created for "good works," v. 10), which God has created in Christ Jesus. We are playing a privileged role in God's plan (v. 10). **Ian S.**

### **Markham**

Many of us are challenged when Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." This is fundamental Pauline theology, but it goes against what many Christians of our time actually believe and practice. Some Christians believe and practice a form of Pelagianism—a fearful hope that they are reconciled with God by their good works. Other Christians believe and practice a form of Semi-Pelagianism based on the anxious hope of being reconciled with God by having *enough* faith. Instead, Paul declares the strong, joyous word that we are saved by faith (not good works) and faith itself is a gift from God (not something we conjure up on our own). Thanks be to God!

The good news is that we do not need to launch into a frenzy of good works in order to earn God's love and forgiveness. Nor do we need to engage in the endless navel gazing of asking, "Do I believe? Do I *really* believe? Am I saved? Am I *really* saved?" Not at all. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." The good news is that faith is a gift from God and grace is a gift from God given through Jesus Christ.

But before we decide that the Christian life simply means relaxing by the swimming pool, sipping drinks with little umbrellas jutting out the top, Paul reminds us of the second part of the equation: "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." Yes, we are saved by grace through faith. No, we do not rely on good works to be saved. But we *are* what God has made us—people "created in Christ Jesus for good works." So good works are now transformed. Instead of being frantic means for trying to save ourselves, good works are the blessed opportunity for us to live out the lives we were destined to live. Good works are expressions of Christ alive in us ministering to the world. Good works are demonstrations of our present reality and future; we are God's royal children exercising God's dominion of love in the world.

Instead of the powers of greediness, we can generously share our time, abilities, and money. Rather than being proud about physical appearance, gluttony, obsession with work, gossip, hatred, and laziness, we can demonstrate that we are beautiful children of God with hearts for loving each other and God's creation. We can show that love in our care for those in poverty, war, unfair conditions for the poor, and in political choices that make life easier for us but bring hurt to the weak and persons on the margins of society. **Jeff Paschal**

Christians today come to worship with the common burden of fallenness, admitting our universal weakness to the powers uniting us and paradoxically strengthening us in opposition to powers. Churches, often hosts for 12-step program meetings, can learn from such groups how to share stories of struggle and temptation. As part of our Lenten confessional discipline, our liturgy can encourage people to name aloud or silently specific powers that haunt them or loved ones, inviting members to witness to internal and social struggles that have distorted God's creation.

The church's best bet is to enlist the least and weakest of its membership in redemptive ministry. How can members be prophets to congregations concerning powers? How can members become conscious of our participation in powers as we were tempted to define ourselves by the powers? We can learn from each other's alternative visions of faithfulness.

While we can oppose the forces, make personal headway against them, and forge our identity as church in relation to them, we cannot defeat them. "No one may boast" that we have overpowered the powers. We are too weak. Not even Christ defeated the powers in life. It is Christ's resurrecting victory over sin and death that manifests and verifies our hope of redemption. The already, but not yet quality of the resurrection is why we return perennially to Lent, unable to avoid Christ's death to the powers but able to foretaste Christ's decisive victory. **Adam E. Eckhart**

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