

“The Gospel of God’s Grace”
Sermon Series on the Book of Ephesians #4
First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
Dr. Peter Barnes
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(Eph. 2:1-10)

Introduction.

We all like stories where there are great reversals of fortune. When everything looked bleak and there was no hope left, all of a sudden victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat.

I’m a big fan of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy of books and films. Maybe you are too. Do you remember the scene toward the end of *The Two Towers*, the second film in the series? There is a wonderful moment in the movie. Just when all seemed lost in the battle at Helm’s Deep, when the armies of Saruman seemed too strong and they were going to prevail, Gandalf and the Riders of Rohan show up just as the sun rises in the east. The light floods the whole valley, the darkness is dispelled, and suddenly the tide turns in the battle. Victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat. It’s a great reversal of fortune.

This morning we read of another great reversal of fortune, but this time it had nothing to do with Tolkien’s fantasy in make believe Middle Earth. In Ephesians 2 the apostle Paul writes about the reversal of fortune regarding our salvation in real life. Just when we were spiritually lost and had no hope, God came to the rescue. Let’s take a look at what Paul has to say about: 1) our human condition; and 2) God’s divine compassion.

I. Our Human Condition.

Has there ever been a time in human history when people have been more discouraged about the human condition? Every generation has had its own prophets of doom, but with our instant access to world events through the media, we’re now able to grasp the worldwide extent of evil today as never before. Terrorist attacks, racism, religious persecution, opioid addiction, mass shootings, and cyber-attacks – the list goes on and on and on.

There are some who still believe that people are basically good, but that’s a conviction that is becoming less and less popular and more and more difficult to defend. The apostle Paul’s assessment of things in Ephesians 2 appears to be more consistent with the map of reality. Of the human condition, he says 3 things: a) we’re dead in our sins; b) we’re enslaved to our passions; and c) we’re condemned before God. Let’s consider each of these sobering statements briefly.

A. We're dead in our sins. *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins..." (2:1).* There are two different words Paul uses here for sin. The first word is *paraptoma*, which is translated "transgression." It literally means a slip or a fall. It was used of a person who lost his way and strayed off the road and goes into a ditch. "Trespass" is how some translations render the word, because it also meant "crossing a known boundary." The word refers to a person who fails to stay on the right road and gets lost and goes where she shouldn't go.

The second word Paul uses for sin is *hamartia*. It's a word that was used in the world of archery, and it means "to miss the mark." A person shoots an arrow at the target, but it misses. That's *hamartia*. Sin is the failure to hit the target of the life God designed us to live. It misses the mark of God's holiness.

Often, when we think of sin, we think of someone like a terrorist, or a serial killer, or a sex offender – people like that. Sometimes we have a hard time thinking that sin has very much to do with us. Oh sure, we know we're not perfect, but we don't feel like we're really all that bad either. However, *hamartia* brings us face to face with the reality of what sin really is. It's a failure to hit the mark of who God wants us to be and what He wants us to do.

Think about your family. Are you as good a husband as you ought to be? Do you love your wife in selfless ways all the time? Or are you moody around your family, and do you sometimes take out your frustrations on them? Are you as good a wife as you ought to be? Do you take an interest in your husband's work and try and understand his problems and worries? Are you as good a parent as you ought to be? Do you discipline your kids when they get out of line, or do you shirk your responsibility because you're tired of the conflict? Are you the kind of children God wants you to be? Do you ever say thank you for all our parents have done for you? Do you see the hurt in their eyes when you're rude or mean to them? Sin is missing the mark of what we could and should do but fail to do.

In this passage the apostle Paul tries to explain to his readers how God rescued them from spiritual death that resulted from their sin. Most Presbyterians have a hard time appreciating this biblical truth, because as a lot we're pretty good people who live fairly respectable lives. We're willing to admit that we might be a little under the weather spiritually – we know there are places where we could improve, but we're not really comfortable with the notion that we're spiritually dead.

Paul begs to differ. He says you and I have no hope apart from Jesus Christ, and it's only by grace that we have been saved. And none of us can do enough good deeds to change that situation. God's standard is spiritual perfection, and each of us has missed the mark. So, we're dependent upon God to rescue us from the state of spiritual death we're in. He is our only hope.

B. We're enslaved to our passions. *"All of us lived [as disobedient people] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and*

thoughts" (2:3). The passions of our bodies and the loves of our hearts, which are natural and good in and of themselves, often become twisted or misdirected, and they lead us into sin.

Let me give you some examples. Say you have a desire for food, but it leads to gluttony. Or you have a desire for sleep, but it leads to sloth. Or say you have a desire for sex and companionship, but it leads to lust and an affair. Or you have a desire for recognition, but it leads to pride. Or you have a love for the Tar Heels and you become arrogant over the national championship you won in basketball this year. (Okay, I guess some excessive passions are okay.) Our passions have a way of enslaving us, and they lead us away from God.

Elsewhere in the NT Paul writes about his own struggle to live the life he knew God wanted him to live. In Romans 7 he says that he wants to do good, but he can't. And the very thing he doesn't want to do, that's the very thing he does. Paul concludes by saying, "*O, wretched man that I am, who will set me free from this body of death?*"

Where do you find yourself enslaved to your appetites, your passions, and what you love today? Recently, I read where 60% of Americans are overweight. The average family's credit card debt is around \$8,000. 24% of the men in America and 14% of the women have been unfaithful to their spouses. We're a nation of people that gratifies the cravings of our sinful nature, and we're enslaved to our passions.

C. We're condemned before God. Not only were we dead in our sins and enslaved to our passions, by our very nature we were also objects of God's wrath, just like the rest of humanity (2:3b). Paul says that we deserve God's righteous judgment because of all the ways we have broken His heart as well as His law. Every single day of our lives, you and I reaffirm the biblical truth called original sin. Every day we miss the mark, we transgress God's boundaries, we succumb to our cravings, or we give in to our passions. And God is right in passing His judgment. And He says, "Guilty."

Many years ago, the famous psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote in a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* In that book, he writes that on "a sunny day in September, a stern-faced, plainly dressed man could be seen standing still on a street corner in the busy Chicago Loop. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he would solemnly raise his right arm, and pointing to the person nearest him, he would intone loudly the single word 'guilty!' Then, without any change in expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture. Then, again, the raising of his arm, the pointing, and the solemn pronouncing of the one word 'guilty!'"¹

The effect of this strange pantomime on passersby was almost eerie. They would stare at him, look away, look at each other, then at him again, and they

would hurry on. One man turned to another person and said, "How did he know?" How did he know, indeed? Are all of us guilty? Guilty of lying? Guilty of arrogance and pride? Guilty of envy and gossip?

I think that each of us knows deep down that we're guilty, that we're sinners? No matter how much we may want to mask the reality of sin in our lives and try to explain it away or excuse our behavior, deep down we know it exists, and it exists in all of us.

This is not a description of some random decadent group of people. It's a portrait of every single person. Paul says all of us are dead in our sins, all of us are enslaved to our passions, and all of us are condemned before God. However, the good news of this passage is that Paul doesn't end there. He goes on from talking about our human condition to describe God's divine compassion.

II. God's Divine Compassion.

In verse 4 we read the words, "*But God...*" In the NIV translation of this verse the two words are separated by a number of other words, but in the original Greek manuscripts they are juxtaposed right next to each other at the very beginning of the sentence. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, a famous English preacher of a generation ago, said that the whole of the gospel is found in these two simple words. They tell us what God has done for us and how He intervened in what was an otherwise hopeless situation. God didn't leave us in our condition of spiritual death. In His mercy and compassion He opened up an altogether new avenue for salvation and hope.

We were dead in our sins, but God made us alive in Christ. We were enslaved to our passions, but God broke the bonds and set us free. We were condemned before the Lord, but God in His great mercy forgave us and has given us a fresh start. But God....

Today we're celebrating communion together. It's a time when we remember just what it took for God to win our salvation – the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Author Philip Yancey once reflected upon the lives of people who came forward to receive communion one day when he had the privilege of assisting in serving the sacrament in his church when he lived in Chicago.

He said, "I knew the stories of some of the people standing before me. I knew that Mabel, the woman with strawy hair and bent posture who came to the senior's citizen's center, had been a prostitute earlier in her life. My wife worked with her for seven years before Mabel confessed the dark secret buried deep within.... She could never forgive herself, she said. But now she was standing at the communion rail, spots of rouge like paper discs pasted on her cheeks, her hands outstretched, waiting to receive the gift of grace. 'The body of Christ broken for you, Mabel.'"²

All of us stand at the foot of the cross on the same footing. We're all sinners saved by grace. That's true if you've ever sought love in all the wrong ways, like Mabel did, but it's also true if you've cheated on your taxes, or yelled at your kids, or resented someone else's good fortune. The amazing miracle of grace is that God didn't leave us in our sin. Instead, He gave up the comforts of heaven, put on our human flesh, and died the sinner's death in our place so we could have new life in Him.

Conclusion.

You know, if you feel like you're a pretty good person and you believe that God has just given you a little bit of help for some self-improvement in providing your salvation, then you're not really inclined to give very much of your life to Him, are you? I mean, after all He's lucky to have a good person like you on His team.

However, if you believe that God rescued you from something like a spiritual sinking ship and that you were lost and He saved you from certain death, then you have an entirely different attitude about what God has done for you in Christ. And your gratitude is expressed in a much more profound and deeper way. How do you see it? What do you think Christ really did for you on the cross?

"But God." Two of the most wonderful words that have ever been spoken. They refer to the great reversal of fortune you and I can experience if we let God have His way. Just when all was hopeless, God turned the tide, and He came to our rescue. Let's rejoice in the gift of God's love and the sacrifice He made on our behalf in Christ. It is what has brought us into a household of faith.

"For it is by grace that you have been saved, and this not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8,9).

¹ Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became Of Sin*, p. 1.

² Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* p. 277.