

Ephesians 2

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[0 : 0 0] We've reached the third of the five solas of the Reformation, sola gracia, or grace alone.

The five solas are an attempt to capture, in short, compass those biblical truths rediscovered by the Reformers in the 16th century, men like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox, among many others. It's important to stress, as we've done once or twice already, that what the Reformers sought to do was to bring the church back to the Bible. They were not innovators, but excavators, excavating the truth, or for the truth, in God's Word in the Bible.

We've also noted, and it's worth reminding ourselves, that the solas have to do principally with the Bible's teaching on salvation. How can men and women, how can you and I, be right with God?

Now, the manner in which I want to tackle this third of the five solas, sola gracia, is to zoom in on one portion of the Bible where Paul, in vivid and unequivocal terms, establishes that salvation, our salvation, your salvation, is by grace alone. And we find that very clearly laid out for us in the passage read there in Ephesians chapter 2. And what I want to do this morning is to provide a survey of this passage that allows us to understand in some measure what grace is and why our salvation is and can only be by grace alone. Now, there is a lot in this passage.

I was just having a look at a series of sermons on Ephesians by a preacher, Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, and he has a series on Ephesians. And I was just curious as to how many sermons he preached on these 10 verses. And so, I was counting them. I didn't read them, but I did count how many there were.

[2 : 0 4] And there were 13. I must admit, I thought there might have been more than that. But nonetheless, 13 sermons on these 10 verses. Well, I'm just going to try and do it in one. So, I don't know if that's an act of folly or what it is. But the idea is that we want to survey three big truths that we find in this passage. And the three big truths, the headings that will guide what we have to say, the themes that we want to highlight are as follows. First of all, we want to notice God's diagnosis, diagnosis, a description of man's condition and plight, the condition and plight of men and women.

What is God's diagnosis? We find that in this passage. But we also want to notice God's action, what He does in response to our condition, in response to our plight. So, the question there is, what has God done? But then we want to home in on really what's at the heart of our concern this morning. And that is God's grace. And there really, we're answering the question, why has God acted in the way that He has done so? So, the problem, what God has done in response to the problem, and then to say or ask why. Why did God do what He did? And that is where we will see that grace comes very wonderfully to the fore. So, first of all, then God's diagnosis. Now, before some news reports, if you're watching the news on TV, sometimes there's about to be a report that is going to be presented, and the newsreader will give a warning along the lines of, well, some of the images included in the following report might be distressing. And I kind of feel that the first four verses of Ephesians chapter 2 merit some kind of public sensitivity warning. Suffice it to say that the picture painted in these first four verses of the chapter, the picture painted is not a pretty one.

What does Paul say about the human condition? And remember that what Paul says, as we discovered when we were exploring Sola Scriptura, is what God says, as all Scripture is God-breathed.

I think we could summarize what is said about humankind, about you and me, to make it more personal, in three statements. We are corpses, we are captives, and we are condemned. Three truths that Paul declares about us, about human beings, about men and women. I did warn you that it wasn't pretty.

Now, notice that Paul is speaking in the past tense. There in verse 1, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. The reason he's speaking in the past tense, or the reason he's pointing to a past reality, is that he's speaking to those who had been rescued, who had been saved by God. We'll come to have a look at what God did to secure that.

[5 : 07] But he's saying that before, you, like everybody else, like the rest, were dead. Corpses. You were captives. You were condemned. That was your condition. Let's just think of each of these things in turn. First of all, we are corpses, or we are dead. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. Paul is saying that everybody apart from Christ, that is separate from Christ, is dead. Now, you could reasonably respond that such a claim is manifestly nonsense.

Many people would say, well, that's just not true. That is nonsense, like literally nonsense. If we were to leave this building, if I were to walk out into Rosemount Viaduct, if any of us were to walk out in Rosemount Viaduct and just wander up the viaduct, we'd bump into people. And no doubt, the people we would bump into would represent maybe any number of different religions, some of no religion at all. But one thing that they would share is that all of them would give the distinct impression of being very much alive. And so, what is Paul on about when he says that we are dead?

Well, of course, Paul knows that in that sense, we are all alive, we're living, we're breathing. In the same very sentence, he acknowledges that. He says, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live. So, he sees it's perfectly possible for these two realities to coexist, to live and yet be dead. He realizes that. He is speaking of the experience of the living when he describes them as dead. And the clue to what's going on, to what he means is to be found in what he identifies as the cause of death, namely our transgressions and sins. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. What Paul is noticing and highlighting is that sin produces spiritual death. You know, he puts it in other language on other occasions. He speaks of how the wages of sin is death. Sin produces death, produces spiritual death. We can maybe better understand what that's about if we pause and consider the alternative to spiritual death, namely spiritual life. What does spiritual life consist of at its heart? Well, at its heart, spiritual life is about friendship with God.

Spiritual or eternal life is to know God. Spiritual death, produced by sin, is to be separate from, to be alienated from God. What is this sin that produces spiritual death? Well, there in the very first verse, two words capture the two ways in which we all offend God. The word translated transgressions is a word that points to the way in which we all break the rules. So, there are those things that we ought not to do, but we do. Then interestingly, the word translated sins is a word that has at its root the idea of missing the mark. So, there are those things that we ought to do. There is a life that we ought to live that we don't live. And these two words together really capture the reality of our sin. And it is this sin that produces spiritual death. So, we are corpses. But also, we are captives. Notice in verses 2 and 3,

Paul speaks about something that I was touching on with the children. The word captive doesn't, you won't find it in these two verses, but in these two verses, that is the sense of the word to follow.

[9 : 07] Notice it comes up on a couple of occasions. In verse 2, it speaks about in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work and those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.

What Paul is saying when he speaks of human beings, men and women, all of us, following, he's speaking of a sense in which we're captive to that. There is a direction in which we're going that we can't change. We're following. We're following the ways of the world. We're following the desires and thoughts of our hearts. And even if we were to acknowledge that that's a problem, we can't get out of that flow that we're in, that current that we're following along. We're captives to that way of living. So, we're captives. Now, this is seldom a conscious captivity.

We don't always feel captive, which is what makes our captivity all the more pernicious, because we don't realize that we're captives. You may feel as free as a bird, but Paul says that outside of Christ, you are captive and bound. So, we're dead, we're corpses, we're captive.

But then thirdly, we are condemned. In verse 3, he says as follows. The second half of verse 3, like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. Now, the wrath or the anger referred to here by Paul is the wrath or the anger of God. Now, this sounds very harsh, but what does it mean?

Well, God's wrath or God's anger is His personal, righteous, and constant hostility to evil. We are all by nature evil or sinful, and so stand condemned before a just and holy God. But why does Paul say that this is true by nature? Well, the answer is that the human race, of which we all form a part, fell together with our first father, Adam. We all fell with Adam, and so we share in his sin and guilt by nature, by nature of being connected to Him. To put it in a way that's maybe easier to capture, we're not sinners because we sin, but rather we sin because we're sinners. It is in our very nature. Now, if what we've said already sounded harsh, this sounds unfair, and I think many people respond in that way. And I have a lot of sympathy with those who say, well, that doesn't seem fair.

[12 : 01] It doesn't seem fair that somehow what somebody else did affects me. Now, I get that. I get that sense of unfairness or apparent unfairness, but bear with me because there's a real upside to this matter of being represented by another, and we'll come to that in a moment. So, these three words capture our human condition. We're dead, we're corpses, we're captives, and we're condemned.

Now, do you recognize this diagnosis, or do you see it as altogether too gloomy? Should we, as Christians, not be more positive and upbeat about humanity? Why so miserable?

I was listening to the radio this past week, and listening to a member of the Armed Forces being interviewed who formed a part of a team, an assessment team, I think that was the language used, that were heading to the Caribbean to assess the extent of the destruction produced by Hurricane Irma. So, he was being interviewed about what they were going to do. Now, the job of this team, this assessment team, was not to rescue anybody. It wasn't to rebuild anything. It was to assess.

Of course, their assessment and report would then inform what action needs to be taken in the rescue and rebuild operation. Following their work of assessment, the team will produce a report. They maybe already have done so. I don't know what the timescale of this is. He was speaking before they'd actually gone. And in that report, I would imagine they will present in stark and brutal detail, but accurately, the extent of the devastation of the homes, of the infrastructure, of public services, and so on. So, you can imagine the scene. You know, the team have got together, they've produced the draft report. Now, just imagine this. Imagine if one member of the team read the draft report and he said, listen, hey, you know, guys, this report, you know, it's just way too negative. You know, we need to lighten up and produce something a bit more cheery. Let's talk about the friendly people and the beautiful beaches and the amazing rum. Why don't we include that in the report? Why so much gloom and doom and negativity? You know, what would the other members of the team think about that contribution? They would say, well, this guy's lost the place. Well, of course, we've got to present things as they are.

Of course, we've got to say how devastating the hurricane has been. We can't play that down. That's not going to help anybody. Imagine if there was a play down report, a very positive report, came to the foreign officer, whoever it is that has to, you know, get, you know, loosen the purse strings. They'd say, oh, things aren't that bad. You know, they don't need that much money. They all seem very well. No, that there needs to be a realistic diagnosis, however stark it might be, of the situation. And that is what we've got here. We have a stark diagnosis. Nobody denies it's stark, but it is true and it is realistic, and that is what we need. And so, given that that is so, in terms of the human condition, given how stark our condition, we have to recognize that we have a problem. And we have a problem at two levels. The basic level is that we are separated from God, that we're living against God, that we're condemned by God. But we have another problem.

[15 : 34] And the other problem is that there is absolutely nothing we can do to resolve our problem. As a rule, I don't know if in your experience things are different, but as a rule, corpses can't do very much. There's nothing we can do. We're dead. We can't say, oh, wow, this is a big problem, but hey, I'm going to solve it. We can't do that. Let me tell you a story about our pet tortoise. This is a tortoise that we had back in Peru. Our tortoise didn't have a name, which doesn't suggest we were very loving owners. But nonetheless, that's the reality, I confess. And we just called our tortoise, tortoise. Or in Spanish, we called our tortoise, tortuguita, which at least gives a little bit of a, more of a friendly tone because it translated means little tortoise. Tortuguita. That's our tortoise. One day, Tortuguita died. Now, I didn't promise you it was going to be a happy story. Now, I'll spare you the circumstances of her death, as they're not pleasant. If you really want to know, you can ask me afterwards, but it wouldn't be appropriate to share with all and sundry. But the point is, Tortuguita died. Now, our recently deceased

Tortuguita, as she awaited burial, was placed on the lawn in our garden. Now, the thing is that a friend came to visit who was unaware of our loss and wandered into the garden only to see Tortuguita, recently deceased, sitting quietly where she had been placed. Our friend, her name was Rosenda, and just to give a little bit more of a personal touch, she called out to Tortuguita. She was a frequent visitor to our home. She went, Tortuguita, Tortuguita, Tortuguita, hoping for some kind of response. Now, you might think that Tortuguitas, even the best of times, don't respond much, but but ours did. She was a friendly creature. So, our friend was, you know, encouraging her to respond, Tortuguita, Tortuguita, Tortuguita, but nothing. Now, Rosenda even approached Tortuguita and gave her a little kick, a gentle kick. It wasn't a brutal kick, just a wee prod, hoping for some kind of response. Nothing. No response. Now, I'm going to ask you a question that's just so insulting, almost, in terms of how easy the answer is, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Why was Tortuguita so incapable of even polite social interaction? Because Tortuguita was dead. She was dead.

And that is our spiritual condition. We're dead. We can do nothing to remedy our spiritual condition. However much others might even prod us or cajole us gently, graciously, to help us to do something about it, to solve this problem. We simply cannot, because we are spiritually dead.

Now, I readily acknowledge that there are many, some of whom who would profess to be Christians, who would dispute what I am saying as to the gravity of our condition about man's absolute spiritual incapacity. Some of you may have seen an interview with Donald Trump where he has posed the question, and I quote word for word. The question that he was posed was this, have you ever asked God for forgiveness? And this is how he replied. And again, this is word for word. You can Google it and confirm if I'm being fair to him in terms of quoting him word for word. His answer to the question, have you ever asked God for forgiveness was as follows, I don't think so. If I do something wrong, I try and make it right. I don't bring God into that picture.

Trump is saying two things. Firstly, that in his opinion, sin isn't really a big problem. And that even if it is a problem, he can solve it himself. Now, I appreciate that Trump mocking is almost a national pastime, but I suspect that on this one, he is echoing the public mood. That is what most people think. They say, well, sin, it's not really that big a problem. And well, if it is a problem, well, yeah, I can solve it myself. I can make it right. I don't need to bring God into that picture.

[19 : 57] I don't need to burden God with my sin. I can deal with it myself if indeed I am guilty of sin at all. Well, what about you? Do you acknowledge the problem? Do you recognize God's diagnosis?

Which moves us on to God's action. We're going to spend less time in God's action and God's grace, which seems a questionable division of time, but I think it was important to set the scene.

What did God do or what has God done in the face of this problem that Paul identifies? The umbrella word that captures any number of actions on the part of God on our behalf is the word saved. Paul says to his readers, it is by grace you have been saved. He says that on two occasions in verse five and then again, subsequently, it is by grace you have been saved. Now, what does that mean? I'm saying that the word saved is a kind of umbrella word. God's salvation mirrors or responds to each element of our condition that we've already identified, that we're dead, that we're captives, that we're condemned. Notice how God's salvation responds to each of these realities. In verse five, what is it that we're told that God does? But God, because of his great love for us, made us alive in Christ, the first thing that is spoken of, resurrection. You see, men and women don't need reformation. They need resurrection. It's not about changing your lifestyle. It's not about making resolutions to be a better person. That's not what you need. What we need is resurrection.

We're dead. We need to be resurrected. And that is what God has done. God made us alive with Christ. Even when we were dead in our transgressions. And so what God has done mirrors that big problem of being dead, but also liberation. Remember, we're captives, but God liberates us. Then in verse six, we read, and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

We used to follow blindly our masters, incapable of living the life that God created us to live. God's salvation involves being liberated or set free, set free to live a life in friendship with God and in the service of God. We are, Paul says, seated with him. We're enabled to do good works, which he has prepared for us. We couldn't do them before. We couldn't do anything that pleased God, that had any spiritual volume. Now we can because of God's liberation, resurrection, liberation, but also acceptance. We were condemned, no longer condemned, but now part of the royal family, seated with God and part of his family, pardoned, accepted, adopted in Christ. And notice that all of these benefits, the ones we highlight in this passage, and there are many others, all of these benefits are described as being with Christ or in Christ. And this takes us back to what we were saying about Adam, that just didn't seem very fair, you know, that we fell with Adam, that we died with Adam. And you say, well, that's not very fair. Well, notice the parallel, and maybe you won't be so upset with the Adam reality. You see, there's a parallel here. We died with Adam, our representative head. As part of the human race, we fell with him. But we're made alive with or in Christ, who is spoken of by Paul as the second Adam.

[23 : 42] He represented us. And so we die with him, we're resurrected with him, we live with him. This is the upside that I was talking about in this matter of being represented by another. Now, we can't begin to do justice to all that is said here and elsewhere in the Bible about what God has done to save us and all that is encompassed in our salvation. The key thing to stress for our purposes today is that God in Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, has done everything. We contribute, nothing. There is nothing you can bring to the table. There is nothing you are required to bring to the table. God has done everything. That is God's action. He has done everything to save us, to resurrect us, to liberate us, to accept us, to adopt us into his family. He has done everything that was needed. Which leads us to the third element and the question. The question is why?

Why did God do what He did? Why did He resurrect and liberate and pardon His people? Why would He do that? What motivates Him? And Paul gives us the answer in verse 4. And this is where grace comes beautifully into the picture. What does Paul say there? He says, but because of His great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive in Christ and then goes on to describe all that He's done for us. He answers the question why? And we can maybe just think about the words there in that verse and think about them in the order in which actually Paul writes them. You know, when you translate from one language to another, sometimes there's a reordering in the order of the words and that's understandable. But for this morning, I'd like to just think of what Paul says here in verse 4 in the very order that he wrote the words down. The first thing in verse 4 that Paul wrote as he wrote this letter were the words, but God. And there's real drama here. And in the face of our desperate plight, dead, condemned, captives, God has taken an initiative. The only one able to take an initiative has taken an initiative. But God, even before you read on what follows, there's this ray of hope, there's this glimmer of light. In the midst of the darkness, there's hope. And Paul is saying, yes, it's a terrible picture I'm painting, but read on. Because something has happened. God has done something. But God, God's intention to intervene is announced by the apostle. And then he explains why God intervenes. Because in the order that he wrote, he then said, who is rich in mercy? Paul describes God's character as merciful. When Paul looked down on us in our lostness, in our deathly state, he had compassion on us. He was moved to compassion by the desperate condition that we were in. Why? Because he is rich in mercy.

And then he goes on to say, because of his great love for us, resurrected us, raised us. God's saving initiative on our behalf is born of his great love for sinners. The origin of God's saving initiative is entirely in God himself. God's merciful character and loving disposition towards sinners like you and me found expression in what he did to save us in and through the work of his Son. And this is grace.

Grace, the grace by which sinners are saved, is that dynamic expression of the mercy and love of God that we see and experience in the saving work of Jesus. Our salvation, your salvation, is altogether undeserved. There is nothing that you contributed to it, no merit attached to you being a Christian if you are a Christian this morning. It is all of grace. It is God who took the initiative and he did so entirely out of his own merciful and loving character. It was entirely his own prerogative to look down in mercy upon you and save you. And that is what we mean and that is what the reformers meant and that is what Paul means. That is what God means when in his word we're told that we are saved by grace alone.

By grace alone, we rest entirely and joyfully in the reality that we are saved, we are made right with God, we're resurrected, we're liberated, we're accepted by grace alone, by the grace of God as it found such dramatic and dynamic expression in the giving of his Son Jesus to be our Savior. Let's pray.

[29 : 11] Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that you are a God who is rich in mercy. We thank you that it is because of your great love for us that you took that saving initiative on our behalf in the sending of your own Son Jesus to be our Savior, to live a perfect life, to die a sinner's death, to be raised from the grave, triumphant over death, and that as we are identified with him, so we die with him and are raised with him to eternal life. And we thank you that all of this that all of this is of grace and of grace alone. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.