

# The SBJT Sermon: The Gospel Truth

Ephesians 2:1-10  
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When you are confronted with a decision, how important is it to know the truth? As you are weighing competing options, how vital is it to have the facts? As you stand at a crossroads attempting to chart a successful course, how critical is it to have accurate information?

I suppose if the decision is of little consequence, if all the options have similar outcomes and if all paths lead to the same destination, then it may not be so important to know the truth.

But when the consequences are weighty, when the outcomes are not equal but are eternal, and when the destinations are as different as heaven and hell, then everyone of us will surely want to know the truth . . . the gospel truth!

Fortunately, when it comes to the core issue of our lives—how we may be rightly related to the living God—the Bible gives us completely reliable and accurate information, it clearly and explicitly lays out the facts we need to know and it candidly communicates the truth that sets us free.

One of the places in the Bible where the truth of the Christian gospel is set forth in brief, but beautiful, fashion is in the first ten verses of the second chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. In what one writer has called "a veritable mine of spiritual truth,"<sup>1</sup> the first three verses tell us *the truth about ourselves*, verses four through seven tell us *the truth about God*, and the final three verses tell us *the truth about salvation*.

## The Truth About Ourselves

First, the Bible teaches us the truth about ourselves—who we are apart from Christ. And, to tell you the truth, the news is not good. The facts are startling and sobering.

Apart from Jesus Christ, the Bible says, *we are dead* . . . "dead in our trespasses and sins" (v. 1). Our spiritual condition is that of a corpse. Spiritually speaking, we are lifeless, helpless and hopeless. We are alienated from God, cut off from his presence and disconnected from his power. Because we are genuinely dead spiritually, we are both unable and unwilling to do anything about our calamitous condition.

I must confess that I have not always conveyed this truth accurately. In fact, I once narrated an illustration that described our condition apart from Christ as follows: "A man was at sea, his ship sank, and he was left bobbing on the waves far from shore with his energy dissipating rapidly. Indeed, he went under once, he went under twice, and was just about to go under for the third time when miraculously a rescue ship appeared. A life preserver was thrown to him, and just before he went under for the last time he clutched the life preserver and was saved."

As I applied the illustration I would say: "The life preserver was grace—that's God's part. But the drowning man had to grasp it by faith—that's man's part. Together, God's grace and man's faith combine to produce salvation."

It sounds like a great illustration, does

it not? Perhaps you have heard it, and some of you may even have used it! The only problem is that it is wrong. It does not accurately convey what the Bible says about our condition apart from Christ.

Notice that the Bible does not say that our condition is life-threatening and that we will soon die. No, the Bible says that before we were made alive in Christ, we were actually, really and genuinely “dead in . . . transgressions and sins” (v. 1).

In terms of the illustration, we have not only gone under once, then twice, but we have gone down for the third and final time. Now we are lying at the bottom of the sea of sin . . . completely lifeless, utterly helpless and absolutely unable to do anything to effect our own rescue. We are spiritually dead!

Unfortunately, the truth about us does not get any better. The Bible says that this spiritual death is a universal condition. *All of us* are dead in sin.

Notice the beginning of verse three, where Paul says: “All of us also lived among them at one time.” Here he specifically includes himself and his people, the Jews, with the recipients of his letter, the Gentiles (cf. v. 11), as being among those who were spiritually dead.

In the book of Romans, Paul states the universality of our sinful condition even more directly by asserting that “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (3:9). Further, he declares that “there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (3:10-12).

There are no exceptions and no exemptions. Apart from Christ, every person on the planet is dead in sin. As Curtis Vaughn has written: “It is as though the whole

world were one vast graveyard and every gravestone had the same inscription: ‘Dead through sin.’”<sup>2</sup>

The Bible then concludes this brief, but devastating description of who we are apart from Christ by stating flatly: “we were by nature objects of wrath” (v. 3). The truth is that our sinfulness is part of our very nature. We do not become sinners because we sin. Rather, it is because we are “by nature” sinners that we sin.

Again the book of Romans is perhaps the best commentary. “Therefore,” Paul writes, “just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, . . . in this way death came to all men” (5:12). And again he says, “the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men” (5:18). And again, “through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners” (5:19).

Michael Horton has it right in his excellent book entitled, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*, when he states: “Like the victims of a contaminated blood transfusion, we all have inherited Adam’s guilt and corruption. . . . Adam included us all in his decision, and that decision was fatal for the entire race.”<sup>3</sup>

This truth may be difficult to accept, but it is not at all difficult to observe. Two simple questions will make the matter obvious. Question one: how many of you are parents? Question two: how many of you parents had to teach your children to disobey? Of course, you did not. None of us did. They, and we, were inclined to it *naturally*.

As the founders of Southern Seminary affirmed in the *Abstract of Principles* which have guided that institution since its inception, all of Adam’s “posterity inherit a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His law, are under condemnation, and as soon as they are capable of moral action,

become actual transgressors.”<sup>4</sup>

The final truth about us is that because we are sinners—both by nature and by choice—we are “objects of wrath.” Literally, the text says that we are “children of wrath.” Every child of Adam’s race comes to this world as an enemy of God, is under his condemnation and is a recipient of his wrath—a divine hostility that is the necessary response of a righteous God to all that is evil.

The truth is that apart from Christ ours is a desperate plight. Sin, death, and wrath are the common experiences of us all. We are spiritually destitute and are justly condemned by a holy God.

While our condition apart from Christ should certainly not be overemphasized, that is hardly the temptation of our day. Rather, it is especially imperative today that we enunciate this truth distinctly. For it is only against the backdrop of this bleak, black truth about us that we can properly see the brilliance and breathtaking beauty of the truth about God.

### **The Truth About God**

One of the best ways for us to succinctly, but accurately, unfold the truth about God that is packed into this text is to pose a series of questions. The answers will then emerge one after the other as we walk through verses four through seven together.

The first question is: *who is God?* The answer, found in verse four, is that he is a God who has “great love for us” and is “rich in mercy.” The juxtaposition of these twin affirmations of God’s love and God’s mercy with God’s wrath in verse three is certainly no happenstance.

In the space of two verses the Bible has again welded together in our thinking two great dimensions of God’s character that are often made to be enemies, when in

reality they are not. The God who is holy is also loving. The God who is righteous is also merciful. The God who reveals his wrath “from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men” (Ro 1:18) also “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Ti 2:3). Or, as Paul puts it so magnificently in Romans chapter three, God is “just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (3:26).

The second question we should ask is: *what does God do?* The three-fold answer is that he “made us alive with Christ” (v. 5), he “raised us up with Christ” (v. 6), and “seated us with him in the heavenly realms” (v. 6). Notice at the end of verse six that all in this occurs “in Christ Jesus.”

It is vital to observe that these three verbs—made alive, raised, and seated—are all in the aorist tense and together “express what God has already done for His children in Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

Again, as Curtis Vaughn has written: “We accept the truth that the quickening and the resurrection are spiritual realities from the very moment of conversion. But it staggers the imagination to be told that the enthronement with Christ is already an accomplished fact. Paul is presenting the matter from God’s point of view, and in the mind of God our position in Christ is fixed and certain.”<sup>6</sup>

This awesome truth is not unlike what Paul wrote to the Roman believers when he reminded them that “those God foreknew he also predestined . . . And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Ro 8:29-30). What we know in our spiritual experience as believers now (calling and justification) is bound inextricably to God’s choice in eternity past (predestination) and his promise of

glory with Christ in eternity future (glorification). Absolutely awesome!

Furthermore, the pattern for what we experience *with* Christ has already been established by what happened *to* Christ. Look carefully with me at Ephesians 1:19-20. There we learn that God has already demonstrated “incomparably great power” in Christ when “he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.”

Notice in verse eighteen of chapter one that God’s intention is that the eyes of *our* heart may be enlightened in order that *we* may know that same “incomparably great power” as *we* are made alive in Christ, raised with him and enthroned with him!

The third question we should ask of our text is: *when does God do this?* The answer, clearly stated in verse five, is “when we were dead in our trespasses and sins.” While we were utterly helpless, dead at the bottom of the sea of sin, God, only because of his great love and mercy, did for us what we could never have done for ourselves. He made us alive in the Lord Jesus.

C. H. Spurgeon summarized the entire event well when he wrote: “Understand, that the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures is, that man by nature, since the fall, is dead; he is a corrupt and ruined thing; in a spiritual sense, utterly and entirely dead. And if any of us shall come to spiritual life, it must be by the quickening of God’s Spirit, vouchsafed to us sovereignly through the good will of God the Father, not for any merits of our own, but entirely of his own abounding and infinite grace.”

The fourth and final question is: *Why? Why does God do all this?* The remarkable answer found in verse seven says that God does all this “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kind-

ness to us in Christ Jesus.” Put another way, God’s intention is that all whom he makes alive in Christ, all whom he saves by grace, will be exhibits, displays, or trophies of his grace.

Have you ever been in a friend’s home and been invited into his trophy room? Perhaps he is a golfer, apparently a pretty good one at that, and he is eager to show you the trophy for the club championship, the trophy for the city championship, the award for the low handicap at the club and an assortment of other trophies, medals and honors he has won.

So what is really going on here? What does he want you to do? How does he want you to respond? Does he want you to examine the trophies and then exclaim, “Wow, what exquisite trophies these are! Look at the size of that marble base. Did you notice the detailed craftsmanship on that eagle? Look at the beauty of the engraving. These really are magnificent trophies.”

Oh, no. That’s not the purpose. The intent is for you to adequately examine the trophies and then turn to your friend and say, “Wow, what an extraordinarily gifted golfer you must be!”

In much the same way, God’s desire for those who see us—trophies of his grace—is not that they would say to us, “Wow, what an extraordinary person you are.” Oh, no. God’s intent is that they see our lives, then turn to *him* and say, “Wow, what an awesome God you are!”

In other words, the ultimate end of our salvation is not for us, but for God. Our being made alive, raised and seated with Christ is ultimately intended to bring honor and glory to God! As Paul says three different times in Ephesians chapter one, all that God does for us in Christ is “to the praise of his glorious grace”(v. 6; cf. 1:12, 14). Do not miss the point: even

in our salvation the final focus is not on us, but on God.

This truth is especially critical today to help ensure that we keep our world and life view as believers thoroughly and consistently God-centered. For we not only live in a *world* dead to God and centered on self, but we also are part of a generation of *believers* who seem especially tempted to embrace a subtle, yet insidious kind of “evangelical humanism.” This perspective professes to follow Christ and yet allows, and sometimes even encourages, the focus and attention of Christian living to be on self.

To quote Michael Horton again: “Never before, not even in the medieval church, have Christians been so obsessed with themselves. Never before have people entertained such grandiose notions about humans and such puny views of God.”<sup>8</sup>

We must make sure that an exalted self is not at the center of our thinking or living. Instead, we should remember who is at the center of the circle in Revelation chapter five and begin even now to lift our voices with the choir of the ages whose refrain will forever and always be: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

Now, you may have noticed that as we have unfolded the truth about God in these four verses there is one key phrase that we have neglected. The phrase is at the end of verse five where Paul seems to almost shout: “it is by grace you have been saved.” Our omission has not been inadvertent, however, but intentional. For even though Paul cannot resist interjecting this truth in verse five, he does not explain it fully until the last three verses of our text.

But, having now told us the truth about us and the truth about God, Paul is now

ready to tell us the truth about salvation.

### **The Truth About Salvation**

Nowhere in all of the Bible is the essence and character of our salvation stated more clearly than in verses eight through ten of our text. It is, as F. F. Bruce has observed, “one of the great evangelical summaries of the New Testament.”<sup>9</sup>

The preview we were given in verse five is now repeated, expanded and expounded: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (vv. 8-10).

Notice first that the Bible says that *salvation is by grace*. From start to finish, it is God’s work entirely. We have done nothing to earn it, nothing to merit it, nothing to deserve it. It is wholly and completely “the gift of God.”

Our salvation was initiated by God, it was accomplished by God and will be completed by God. The Father chose us “before the creation of the world” (1:3), redeemed us through the blood of Jesus Christ (cf. 1:7, 2:13), called us by the power of the Holy Spirit and “he will keep [us] strong to the end, so that [we] will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:8). In every sense, we are “God’s workmanship.” Salvation is all of grace!

Next the Bible says that *salvation is through faith*. God’s great gift must be received, and the way we receive it is through faith—a trusting, believing, self-surrendering response that is itself part of “the gift of God.”

“But wait,” someone says, “I thought grace was God’s part and faith was our

part." But what does the Bible say? To what does the phrase "and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" refer? Does it refer specifically to faith or more generally to salvation? Grammatical considerations ("this" is neuter in Greek, while "faith" is feminine) suggest the latter.

Yet, as F. F. Bruce, comments, "It is true, in either case, that we could never exercise saving faith did not the Holy Spirit 'persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.'"<sup>10</sup>

So, the Bible says that the entire process of our salvation, which includes both grace and faith, does not originate with us ("not from yourselves") but is completely the "gift of God."

As John Stott has insightfully observed, "We must never think of salvation as a kind of transaction between God and us in which he contributes grace and we contribute faith. For we were dead and had to be quickened before we could believe. No, Christ's apostles clearly teach elsewhere that saving faith too is God's gracious gift."<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, without faith it is impossible to please God (He 11:6). Only those who believe in the Son have eternal life (cf. Jn 3:16-18, 36), and only through faith are we justified (Ro 5:1).

But we must never conceive of saving faith as something we initiate, we do or we accomplish so that it becomes our work. For the Bible is absolutely clear that our salvation is "not by works, so that no one can boast." As one of the great Reformers has written, faith simply "brings a man empty to God, that he may be filled with the blessings of Christ."<sup>12</sup>

So what is saving faith? How shall we define it? Hear again the *Abstract of Principles*. "Wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit," saving faith is "the belief, on God's authority, of whatsoever is revealed in His

Word concerning Christ; accepting and resting upon Him alone for justification and eternal life."<sup>13</sup>

Analyzed further, we see that saving faith includes three elements. The first is knowledge, acquaintance with the gospel as presented in the Bible. The second is agreement, assent that the gospel is true. The third is trust, "personal dependence on the grace of Father, Son, and Spirit for salvation, with thankful cessation of all attempts to save oneself by establishing one's own righteousness."<sup>14</sup> Salvation is through faith alone!

Next we should note that the Bible says that *salvation is in Christ*. We are, verse ten says, "created in Christ Jesus." This is, in fact, the third time in five verses that Paul has underscored the fact that everything God does for us in salvation is "in Christ" (cf. vv. 6, 7).

When we were dead in sin we were "in Adam." But the life God gives us, indeed "every spiritual blessing" we receive from him, is "in Christ" (cf. 1:3). Therefore, the critical distinction for us all is whether we are "in Adam" or "in Christ."

Finally, the Bible says that *salvation is unto good works*. Though our salvation is not gained "by works" (v. 9), the evidence of its authenticity is that we "do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (v. 10).

As J. I. Packer has pungently put it, "The truth is that, though we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone."<sup>15</sup> It always produces a transformed life, moral fruit, "good works," the absence of which indicates that it is not really saving faith. Or, as James says, "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:17).

So what is the truth about salvation? The truth is that salvation is by grace, through faith, in Christ, and unto good works!

With power and persuasion, the ten verses of Scripture that we have examined have told us the essence of the gospel truth: the truth about ourselves, the truth about God and the truth about salvation. In this truth there is awesome liberating power. In fact, the Bible says in Ephesians 1:13 that it is through hearing and believing “the word of truth” that we are “included in Christ.”

Have you yet believed and received the truth? If not, acknowledge your helplessness condition. Receive God’s awesome gift of grace. Trust the Lord Jesus today. Cast yourself upon Christ and Christ alone. For Jesus’ promise made long ago remains true today. “Whoever comes to me,” he declared, “I will never drive away” (Jn 6:37).

If you have already been transformed by the gospel truth, then rejoice again that God has enabled you to know the truth, and the truth has made you free (cf. Jn 8:32). Celebrate anew the excellency of his great grace and live every moment to “the praise of his glory!”

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#### **ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>Curtis Vaughn, *Ephesians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 54.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Scott Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace: Who Does What in Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 58.

<sup>4</sup>*Abstract of Principles*, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Article IV.

<sup>5</sup>F. F. Bruce *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1961) 50.

<sup>6</sup>Vaughn, 49-50.

<sup>7</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Spiritual Resurrection,” *The New Park Street Pulpit*: Vol. III (1857; rpt. Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1975) 161-168.

<sup>8</sup>Horton, 17.

<sup>9</sup>Bruce, 51.

<sup>11</sup>Horton, 158.

<sup>12</sup> Vaughn, 52.

<sup>13</sup> *Abstract of Principles*, Article X.

<sup>14</sup> J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1993) 159-160.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.