

Week 4: *Alive in Christ: Ephesians 2:1–10*

Hook



Main Point: God has made us alive in Christ to do His good works in the world.

Q: Describe a time in your life when working harder really paid off.

Q: Are there areas in your life in which trying harder won't make a difference?

Our culture loves the idea that if you just work hard enough, you can accomplish anything. While effort certainly matters, there are some things that can't be changed by trying harder. A nearsighted person can't simply try harder to see clearly. Someone drowning doesn't need more determination; he needs rescue. Some problems require more than effort – they require outside intervention.

Many people approach their relationship with God as though Christianity is about trying harder to be good enough for Him; earning your way into heaven through good deeds. But the Bible teaches that our greatest spiritual problem isn't a lack of effort; it's a condition we cannot fix ourselves. The Good News of the Gospel is that God doesn't tell us to try harder. He does for us what we could never do for ourselves. Today, we'll see how our salvation and standing before God are rooted not in our efforts, but in God's grace.

RECAP: So far, we have learned about Paul's long relationship with the church at Ephesus as their spiritual father. He wrote to the Ephesians from prison to encourage them to live into their identity in Christ. First, he prayed for them, thanking God for their faith, love and witness to the world and praying for them to grow in wisdom and power. In this lesson, Paul gives the Ephesians a succinct theological description of the Gospel, what God has done for us in Christ. We were dead in our sins and God made us alive. He made us a new creation to do His good works in the world.

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Book

Main Point: God has made us alive in Christ to do His good works in the world.

Ephesians 2:1–3 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Sin brings death. Without Jesus, we are dead in our sins.

Q: How did Paul describe those who follow the ways of the world?

Q: How did he describe human nature? Is this what most people in our culture think?

After his opening prayer, Paul summarized the Gospel as the foundation for the rest of the letter, making it clear that salvation is all the work of God. The self-help industry is huge in our culture. There are countless voices telling us how to improve ourselves in everything from weight loss to career to parenting. There are even influencers telling us to work harder to be a “good Christian.” But Ephesians tells a different story. We cannot self-help our way into being a “good person.” We are sinners by nature (v. 3), and the only way we can be saved is through Christ. Self-help is about working to become a better version of yourself; the Gospel is about God transforming you. By using the terms “dead” and “alive,” Paul makes the contrast unmistakable (2:1, 5): in Christ, we don’t merely become a better version of ourselves; God brings us from spiritual death to spiritual life.

The picture Paul painted of our life before Christ is bleak, and he didn’t pull any punches. He didn’t say, “You weren’t as good a person then” or “You could have used some improvement.” No, you were spiritually dead (2:1). Spiritual death means separation from God and the absence of a living relationship with Him. We were dead “in trespasses and sins”—living in a pattern of repeated rebellion against God and failure to meet His righteous standard (2:1). We did not merely need moral improvement; we needed God to give us spiritual life.¹

Paul then showed how spiritual death affected the way we lived. Apart from Christ, we followed three things: the world, Satan, and our own sinful desires (2:2–3). We followed the values and patterns of a fallen world opposed to God. We lived under Satan’s influence—the “prince of the power of the air”—who is at work among the “sons of disobedience,” Paul’s description of unbelievers as people living in rebellion against God (2:2). And we followed the sinful desires of our flesh and minds (2:3). Paul said that “we all” once lived this way, showing that this condition applies to Jews and Gentiles alike. As descendants of Adam, we are born into a fallen state and are “by nature children of wrath,” subject to God’s condemnation. Escaping this condition requires nothing less than being made new in Christ.²

Contrary to what humanism teaches and what many in our culture believe, human beings are not inherently good; we are sinful by nature. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Although people can do things that are good by human standards, no one is righteous or good enough to earn God's favor; only God is perfectly good (Mark 10:18; Romans 3:10–12).

Our problem is not just that we have all committed sinful acts; we were born with a sinful nature (Psalm 51:5). Through Adam's sin, sin entered the world and death spread to all people (Romans 5:12). Sin is not merely a matter of doing bad things. If it were, we could simply work harder at changing our behavior.

These opening verses point us away from self-help to God. We are “by nature” children of wrath. We are dead in our sins. Not just weak, not limping along—dead. We can do nothing to save ourselves. If the story ended here, this would be devastating news. But in the very next verse, Paul wrote, “But God ...” The beginning of the Gospel message is hard. But that makes the good news of His grace more amazing.

Q: How can we share with unbelievers the truth that people are dead in sin in a way that draws them to the Gospel instead of scaring them away?

Q: How should this passage shape the way we view and pray for friends or family members who don't yet know Christ?

Ephesians 2:4–7 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Only God can make spiritually dead sinners alive. By grace, He made us alive with Christ.

Q: Why did God choose to make us alive in Christ?

Paul has just told us that apart from Christ we were spiritually dead. We could not rescue ourselves or make ourselves alive. That is why the next two words are so important: “But God” (2:4).

Those words turn our attention from our helpless condition to God's saving action. Because He is rich in mercy and because of His great love for us, God made us alive together with Christ (2:4–5). Paul emphasized that God did this “even when we were dead in our trespasses” (2:5). God did not make us alive because we had improved or made ourselves worthy. He acted in grace to do what we could never do for ourselves. As Paul immediately added, “By grace you have been saved” (2:5).

Paul's descriptions of God's love and mercy point us back to the character of God as He revealed Himself in the Old Testament: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus

34:6; see also Numbers 14:18; Psalm 103:8). The Hebrew word *chesed* is translated as “steadfast love” in Exodus 34:6 (ESV). No single English word captures its full range, which is why it is translated in different ways, including “steadfast love,” “faithful love” and “lovingkindness.” It frequently describes God’s faithfulness toward Israel even when His people were unfaithful to Him.³

Although Paul does not use the Hebrew word *chesed* here, the love and mercy he describes reveal the same unchanging character of God. God made us alive together with Christ solely because of His grace, mercy and love—not because we had done anything to deserve it (vv. 4–5). Dead sinners deserved His wrath, yet He showed us mercy. This is the Gospel, and it is all the work of God.

Paul says that God not only “made us alive together with Christ,” but also “raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places” (2:5–6). Because believers are united with the risen and exalted Christ, we share in His life and victory and can stand against spiritual opposition in His strength—a truth Paul develops when he addresses spiritual warfare later in Ephesians (6:10–18).

Paul describes our being raised and seated with Christ in the past tense because these blessings already belong to every believer. Although we still live on earth, being seated with Christ in the heavenly places describes our position in Him (2:6). We have been joined to the One who is exalted far above every ruler and authority (1:20–23). Our physical resurrection and reign with Christ are still future, but even now, our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

This also connects these verses with Paul’s prayer in the previous chapter. Ephesians 1:19–20 described the immeasurable greatness of God’s power—the power that raised Christ from the dead. That same resurrection power makes spiritually dead sinners alive and unites them with the risen Christ (2:5–6).

God did this so that “in the coming ages” He might display the immeasurable riches of His grace through His kindness toward us in Christ (2:7). Our salvation is not a testimony to our wisdom or goodness; it is an eternal display of God’s grace.

Being made alive means more than receiving the promise of life after physical death. God gives us spiritual life here and now (2:5). Those who once lived with hearts turned away from God are given new hearts that desire Him. Through the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to know, love and obey God. In Christ, we become new creations who can walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17). This is not self-improvement; it is new life produced by the saving power of God.

Q: How have you personally experienced God’s mercy, grace and lovingkindness in your life? How does that affect your relationship with Him?

Q: If you believed people were inherently good, not “dead in sin,” how would that affect your understanding of salvation? Of God’s grace? Of heaven?

Ephesians 2:8–10 [Read]

Talking Point 3: We are not saved by good works; we are saved by grace through faith and remade as God’s masterpiece for good works.

Q: How does remembering your condition in verses 1–3 make verses 4–10 more meaningful?

Q: How does knowing you are God’s workmanship affect your identity and self-worth?

Having established that there are no good people, Paul could explain the proper place for good works in a Gospel worldview. Good works aren’t something we do in our own strength to earn salvation—our efforts cannot save us. Salvation is the gift of God—given, not earned (2:8–9). God gives salvation by grace, and we receive it through faith. Even as far back as Abraham, God showed that people are saved through faith, not by works (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1–5). Saving faith is more than simply believing certain facts about God; it’s putting our trust in God and His grace.

Paul added a “why”—so no one can boast (2:9). A lot of people imagine getting into heaven like a scale: none of us is perfect, but if our good deeds outweigh our bad, perhaps we’re good enough to get in. But that’s not the Gospel. Scripture says there is “no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10–12). Even the deeds we consider righteous are like “filthy rags” compared with God’s perfect righteousness and cannot make us right with Him (Isaiah 64:6). But once God transforms us into a new creation in Christ, He enables us to do the good works He created us to do. We are not saved *by* our good works; we are saved *for* God’s good works.

In Jesus, we have new life—not only eternal life, but new life in the here and now. This new life is marked by Christlike love and service to others. God changes our hearts and fills us with the Holy Spirit, who makes us more like Jesus. Good works come after salvation, as the fruit of our new life in Christ. As the Holy Spirit dwells in us, He grows His fruit in our lives, which is expressed in Christlike attitudes and actions. Our good works, then, are not something we produce in our own power to impress God; they are the result of God working in us and through us. So if we ever do “boast,” it’s only in the Lord (2 Corinthians 10:17).

Paul calls us God’s “workmanship” or “masterpiece” (Ephesians 2:10 NLT). The underlying Greek word, *poiēma*, refers to something that has been made or created.⁴ Our new life in Christ is God’s work of art. He is the Artist, and we are His workmanship—not because of the good works we have done, but because of the saving

work He has done in us. He took people who were dead in sin and made us alive in Christ, creating us anew for the good works He prepared for us to do.

The Japanese art of *kintsugi* offers a helpful picture: broken pottery is repaired with lacquer mixed with precious metal, making the cracks part of its beauty instead of hiding them.⁵ In a similar way, God does not have to hide the broken parts of our stories; He redeems them. Our weaknesses can become places where Christ's power and grace are displayed most clearly (2 Corinthians 12:9–10). Therefore, our testimonies need not gloss over the broken parts of our stories; those places can display Jesus' power. While our culture pressures us to hide our flaws and present a filtered "highlight reel," God often displays the beauty of His workmanship by demonstrating Christ's power through the very weaknesses we would rather conceal.

Being God's masterpiece does not mean we are already perfect. God has made us new creations in Christ, and He continues His work of sanctification in us. We are "being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16) as God works in us (Philippians 2:13).

Throughout Scripture, God accomplished His purposes through ordinary, broken people, and He does the same with us. He takes our ordinary, broken lives and makes something beautiful out of them. We may not feel "good enough" or qualified for what He calls us to do, but our confidence is not in ourselves. It is in the God who saved us, changes us, and equips us to accomplish His purposes.

Good works are what God has created us for—not just whatever we think is "good," but what *He* defines as good. The world tells us to become the best version of ourselves, but the Gospel calls us to become more like Jesus. That is the beauty of God's masterpiece—not that we make something beautiful of ourselves, but that God makes us new in Christ and increasingly shapes us to reflect the image of His Son.

Q: Why is the truth that salvation is entirely by God's grace both humbling and freeing?

Q: Why do we often try to cover up the broken or imperfect places in our lives and act as if we have it "all together" all the time? What would it look like to use our weaknesses to point to God's work in us? How might this help others?

Q: How can what the world calls "good" differ from what God calls good? How can we know the difference?

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Took

Main Point: God has made us alive in Christ to do His good works in the world.

Senior Pastor Jack Graham has said, “Christianity is not self-improvement; it is life transformation.”⁶ That captures the heart of Ephesians 2:1–10. The world says we need to try harder and become better people, but Paul says our problem was much deeper – we were dead in our sins. Dead people don’t need advice or motivation; they need life. And because of His great love, mercy and grace, God made us alive in Christ when we could do nothing to save ourselves.

But God didn’t make us alive merely so we could go to heaven one day. He made us alive for a purpose *today*. We are His workmanship – His masterpiece – created in Christ Jesus for good works. This week, stop measuring your life by how much you’ve improved yourself or what you’ve accomplished. Instead, ask, “How is God transforming me?”

Every morning this week, remind yourself of three truths:

I was dead in sin.

I have been made alive in Christ.

I have been created for God’s purposes.

Then ask God to show you one good work He has prepared for you that day and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, faithfully walk in it.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on your life before Christ and after Christ. How are things different now? What work has God done in your life? Reflect on the broken places God has healed or is still working on. How can your testimony about how God has worked or is working on you help someone else? How might God be calling you to be more authentic and open about sharing your weaknesses? How can you use your weaknesses, brokenness and failures to share the Gospel with others? Reflect on the difference between what God says is good and what the world says are good works that make us “good people.” How can you know what God says is good and reflect that to the world?

PRAY: Praise God for who He is, the God of *chesed*, unending lovingkindness, grace and mercy for His people even when we don’t deserve it. Thank God for the incredible gift of His amazing grace. Pray for your friends who are still walking in the ways of the world, that their hearts will be opened and that they will follow Jesus. Ask God to give you divine appointments to share the Gospel with people in a way that it sounds like good

news to them. Pray for Him to give you just the right moments and just the right words. Ask Him for courage to vulnerably share how He has worked in your broken places to bring glory to Him.

ACT: Share your testimony. God can make your mess a message and your test a testimony. Think back through your life and look at the ways God has worked in your broken places. Write a short testimony of what God has done to make beauty out of ashes in your life. Pray for an opportunity to share that testimony this week, then do it when you feel prompted, and watch how God uses it in someone else's life.

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, "Ephesians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 622.

² Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 45 – 46; Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2264.

³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 338–39.

⁴ Hoehner, "Ephesians," 624.



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⁶ Jack Graham, "The Much More Life," sermon on Ephesians 4:15–32, Prestonwood Baptist Church, June 28, 2020