

Gospel Conversations Part 1:

Know the Gospel

October 8, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Ephesians 2:1-10

Session Outline

1. Dead in Sin (Ephesians 2:1-3)
2. Alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-7)
3. For God's Glory (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Theological Theme

Salvation is a gift of God by grace through faith. Jesus paid the full price for salvation on the cross.



Leader Guide

Gospel Conversations Part 1: Know the Gospel

Introduction

A story has been told about an instant cake mix that continually failed to sell. The instructions on the box said all you had to do was add water and bake. It seemed easy enough, but people would not buy the cake mix. The company couldn't understand why it didn't sell—until their research discovered that the buying public felt uneasy about a mix that required only water. Apparently, people thought it was too easy. So, the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for adding an egg to the mix in addition to the water. The idea worked and sales jumped dramatically.

The facts of this story have been debated, but it is a good illustration of how some people react to the idea of salvation by grace through faith. To many it sounds too easy to be true, even though the Bible says, “you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift— not from works” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Most people think they must do something more, add something to God’s “recipe” for salvation. They think they must perform well or do some special works to gain God’s favor and earn eternal life.

- ❓ Have you ever struggled to believe salvation was as simple as the Bible claims it to be? What makes this hard to believe?
- ❓ What are some “eggs” we want to add to God’s recipe to make salvation more feasible? Why is this always a lost cause?

Session Summary

Ephesians 2 is one of the most important passages in the New Testament regarding the doctrine of salvation. It is also one of the most hotly debated in some circles, as Christians try to understand the exact role of grace and faith in the process of salvation. Some believe “dead” in Ephesians 2 means a person is unable to respond to God until God steps in and gives them the gift of faith so that they can be saved. Others view “dead” in a more figurative sense and believe salvation is the gift of God and faith is the response of sinful people to God’s free gift.

Because this issue has been debated for two thousand years, it is unlikely to be settled during this Bible lesson. Regardless of which side of the debate you may fall on, all Christians agree that Ephesians 2 is important to better understand that God's salvation is freely extended toward sinners. One of the main purposes of theology is to better understand God and His Word. But understanding God is not the greatest goal of theology. The greatest aim of theology is to enable the learner to love God more because of the time spent growing in understanding of the Lord.

At the conclusion of this lesson, you should not only understand the gospel a little better, but you should also love Jesus more because of His unending and undeserved love toward you.

1. Dead in Sin (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Paul wrote the book of Ephesians to the church at Ephesus from a Roman jail. The book is categorized as one of Paul's prison epistles. Ephesians is different from the letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians, which are filled with personal references. Ephesians is a bit more formal and focuses on key theological truths of the Christian faith. In many of Paul's letters, he seems to have been writing to correct a particular theological or moral problem within the church. In the letter to the Ephesians, however, the focus is more like a well check-up with your doctor. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, not to correct a problem, but to give them firm instructions to keep them from having problems in the future.

To that end, Ephesians 2 begins with a clear explanation of who the Ephesians (and all Christians) were before they came to Christ. Paul could have clearly laid out all the prominent sins in the community around Ephesus, but he painted with a dark and broad brush instead. Before Christ, the Ephesians were dead. What was the source of this death? "Trespases and sins" (v. 1).



How do verses 1-3 help us understand what sin is? How do they show us sin is not just a bad choice but a condition in which we live?

Paul's teaching echoed Jesus's words in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). There, when the wayward son returned home, the father gave him gifts and threw a feast. He made this proclamation to the legalistic older brother, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32). There is a profound sense of "foundness" in salvation.

Dead

Paul explained how people were "dead in transgressions and sins," cut off from the life of God and controlled by their own selfish desires. Beyond this they were ensnared by the power of Satan. As a result men and women apart from Christ are without life, without freedom, and without hope.

Just as God sought out His children in Egypt and delivered them from their bondage in the Exodus, so Jesus seeks out His people to free them from their bondage to sin and shame and to deliver them “from death to life” (John 5:24). Unbelievers live in bondage to the “ruler of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2) and live, not to honor the Lord but to gratify the desires and passions of the flesh.

- ❓ The story of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt in the Exodus is one way of understanding salvation. What other Old Testament stories help you better understand God’s work of salvation in your life?

Paul emphasized in Ephesians 2 that the “deadness” of sin and gratification of the flesh is in the past-tense for Christians. Christians were dead, but God has made them alive.

- ❓ Application: How does a proper understanding of what you have been saved from enable you to live more fully for Christ? How might it help you avoid sin?

2. Alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-7)

Dead is what Christians were before they met Jesus. In Christ, Christians have been made alive. Paul wasn’t content with just stating the bare facts. He explained why Christians have been made alive, “But God who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us” (v. 4).

Why does God work in the lives of dead sinners? The Westminster Confession reminds us, “man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹ John Piper suggested the statement be changed to the chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him forever.² It is certainly true that God is glorified in the salvation of sinners. But don’t miss Paul’s wonderful words in Ephesians 2: God has made us alive because He is rich in mercy and He has great love toward His creation.

- ❓ How does it make you feel to know God loves you even though you are a sinner undeserving of his love? How does this motivate you to live for Him?

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote about the value of spiritual gifts and the importance of ministering to the body of Christ through the gifts that God gives. However, in 1 Corinthians 13, he warned that faithful ministry in Christ’s church requires more than gifts and careful thinking. Faithful ministry in the church must be done in love. Without love, words are just noise, knowledge amounts to nothing, and even personal sacrifice brings no gain.

But love is different. “Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, [and] is not boastful” (1 Corinthians 13:4). Why is love so important in the local church? When Christians love, they reflect God to those around them. Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). The God who loves people enough to sacrifice Himself for their salvation expects those He has made alive to reflect His love to the world around them.

- ❓ How does our love for others become an apologetic (defense) of the Christian faith to the world around us? How have you seen this happen in daily life?

Some say imitation is the greatest form of flattery. We pay tribute to Christ when we imitate Him, and when you choose to love others—especially those who do not deserve your love—you are imitating Jesus.

- ❓ Application: What is your “but God” moment? The moment when everything changed for you spiritually? How is your life different now than it was before Christ?

3. For God’s Glory (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Sometimes we use words without really understanding what they mean. Sometimes we use the same word to mean different things depending on the context. An example would be the word faith. Many of us have grown up using this word but can’t really explain what it means. For example, we might talk about someone “leaving the faith,” and faith means a holding a certain set of beliefs. We can say “you need to take a leap of faith,” and faith is a blind trust exercise. Some people even talk about “claiming the promises of God by faith,” and use their faith to try to get God to do certain things. However, the most important definition for faith is found in the Bible. David Dockery defines biblical faith this way:

“Faith includes a full commitment of the whole person to the Lord Jesus, a commitment that involves knowledge, trust, and obedience. Faith is not merely an intellectual assent or an emotional response, but a complete inward spiritual change confirmed to us by the Holy Spirit. Faith is altogether brought about by God, and it is altogether the human response bringing about complete submission and surrender to God and full liberation from the snare of sin.”³

- ❓ Does your faith match the faith described in the Bible or have you made faith into something more about you than about how God has changed your life?

Faith God's full commitment to His children and from people to God. But it is more than that too. In verse 8, Paul said faith is a gift. As we mentioned above, people view this differently, but we can all agree that the opportunity to trust Jesus for salvation is a beautiful gift from the Lord. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden of Eden, God could have banished them from the garden and banished all of humanity from ever having opportunity to have a relationship with him. But God loves His children, is rich in mercy, and has given people the opportunity to trust Him in faith for salvation.

But saving faith isn't God's only gift to His children. God's greatest gift is Jesus, and through Jesus we are also "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (v. 10). Paul brought his argument from Ephesians 2:1-2 full circle in verses 8-10. In your sinful disobedience, you did not glorify God or work to honor God—you were dead in your sins. When Christ gave you new life through salvation, He did not do so only to give you "fire insurance" from hell. He saved you for a relationship with Him and so you could glorify Him through good works. He gives you life to the full.

-  Read John 10:10. How does Ephesians 2:1-10 reflect the promise of abundant life given in John 10:10?
-  Application: What are the good works God has called you to? How are you seeking to live faithfully before Him considering the good news of the gospel?

Conclusion

Ancient Ephesus was an important Roman city on the west coast of Asia. One of the primary attractions of Ephesus was the temple of Artemis (also known as Diana), which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The city also boasted a large theater which held around twenty thousand people. The worship of Artemis was not only a source of pride for the Ephesians but also one of the city's primary economic drivers. Pilgrims flooded into the city to worship Artemis, and as they did, the city profited from the religious tourism.

When Paul preached the gospel of Jesus in Ephesus, he wasn't just making a religious argument; he was announcing a spiritual war on the economic activity of Ephesus. Large scale conversions to Christianity could result in economic ruin for many citizens of the city. As a result, Christians in Ephesus lived difficult lives (Acts 19:21-41). They were persecuted and abused because of their commitment to Jesus.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was written to educate them on how they should live as Christians and to encourage them to live faithfully for Christ in difficult days. For this reason, he urged them to live their new Christian lives with the strength of Christ. They were dead in their trespasses, and Jesus had made them alive. The Ephesian Christians would need more than a good attitude—they would need the power of Jesus working through them. The Ephesians needed to know Jesus knew ahead of time what they would experience and that Jesus would enable them to live out their Christian convictions in a world that did not honor Him.

- ❓ Ephesians 2 helps us better understand the gospel. How would you explain salvation by grace through faith using this passage?
- ❓ Paul said Jesus prepared His people for good works “beforehand.” What does this mean? What sorts of good works might Jesus have prepared you to accomplish?
- ❓ Paul wrote this letter to a group of people who “were dead” in their sins but had been made alive in Christ. Who do you know who needs to hear this message of life? How can you pray for them? When might you get an opportunity to share the gospel with them?

Prayer of Response

Close in prayer thanking God for the reality that He has graciously given life to those who were dead through the finished work of Christ.

Additional Resources

- *What is the Gospel?* by Greg Gilbert
- *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* by Tony Merida
- *Ephesians* by R. Kent Hughes

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Gospel Conversations Part 2: Share the Gospel

Main Passages

- Acts 17:16-34

Session Outline

1. Earning a Hearing (Acts 17:16-18)
2. Finding Connection (Acts 17:19-21)
3. Speaking Truth (Acts 17:22-34)

Memorize

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! - Ephesians 2:4-5

Historical Context of Ephesians

Purpose

The book hints at several purposes. The apostle taught that Jewish and Gentile believers are one in Christ. This oneness was to be demonstrated by their love for one another. Paul used the noun or verb form of love (agapē) nineteen times (about one-sixth of the total uses in all the Pauline letters). Ephesians begins with love (1:4–6) and ends with love (6:23–24).

Paul implicitly addressed matters raised by the mystery religions in the Lycus Valley. The letter has much to say about redemption (1:7) and the divine intention for the human race (1:3–14). Additional themes include grace (1:2), predestination (1:4–5), reconciliation, and union with Christ (2:1–21).

Author

Paul referred to himself by name as the author of the book of Ephesians in two places (1:1; 3:1). Many regard this book as the crown of all of Paul's writings. Today some scholars think the book contains a writing style, vocabulary, and even some teachings that are not typical of the apostle. If that is the case, then it would mean a disciple of Paul had surpassed him in theological insight and spiritual perception. Of such an erudite disciple the early church has no record. Furthermore, pseudonymity (writing under someone else's name) probably was not practiced by early Christians. We can conclude, in line with the indisputable acceptance of Pauline authorship in the early church, that there is no reason to dispute the Pauline authorship of Ephesians.

Setting

Paul penned the letter while in prison (3:1; 4:1; 6:20). Disagreement exists concerning whether Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea (Ac 24:22) around AD 57–59 or in Rome (Ac 28:30) in about 60–62 when he wrote this letter. Tradition suggests that Paul wrote the letter from Rome around AD 60–61 which would have transpired while Paul was under house arrest in guarded rental quarters (Ac 28:30). Paul most likely wrote Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians during the same imprisonment.

Special Features

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is an anthem to the sovereign grace of God displayed toward sinners in Christ. It contains some of the worst news ("you were dead in your trespasses and sins") and best news ("but God . . . made us alive with Christ") in all of Scripture. In view of this grace, Paul calls believers to "live worthy of the calling" we have received.

Extended Commentary

Ephesians 2:1-10

2:1 Dead in your trespasses and sins: Apart from Christ, people are without authentic spiritual life. In this state the most vital part of the human personality is dead; thus people cannot by their own efforts or ingenuity experience fellowship with God or meet his requirements.

2:2 Lived according to the ways of this world: “This world” is associated with the realm of Satan. The way of life without Christ is in accordance with Satan’s ways.

2:3 Previously lived among them in our fleshly desires: “Lived” means turned to and fro and behaved in accordance with certain principles. Apart from Christ, people are dominated by “fleshly desires,” which refers to an orientation away from God toward selfish concerns. The plural suggests multiple unredeemed urges in our life apart from Christ. The unredeemed person is completely at the mercy of the tyrannical self and its lustful impulses. By nature children under wrath: The fall into sin described in Gn 3 was not merely a moral lapse but a deliberate turning away from God in rejection of him. Sin’s entrance brought about a sinful nature in all humanity. Men and women are “by nature” hostile to God and estranged from him. While functioning as free moral agents, sin always negatively influences human decisions and actions. People do not genuinely repent or turn to God apart from divine enablement (Eph 2:5).

2:4 But God: Over against the human rejection of God, Paul painted a picture of the new life manifested in God’s gracious acceptance of sinners because of Christ. The strong contrast points to God’s answer to people’s dreadful situation. Rich in mercy: “Mercy” is God’s compassion for the helpless that relieves their situation. While grace involves God giving believers what they do not deserve, mercy means that God does not give what is deserved.

2:5 Made us alive ... even though we were dead is Paul’s extension of his thoughts in v. 1, which are viewed in retrospect from the vantage point of redemptive history. Because of God’s great love, he “made us alive” with Christ.

2:6 With him God’s loving mercy not only makes new life possible, but by it God has made us alive, raised us up, and seated us with Christ. God’s great power has enthroned us with Christ in the heavenly places, even as Christ was exalted to God’s right hand following the resurrection.

2:7–10 The work of reconciliation in these verses is described with four key terms:

- (1) kindness - God’s loving tender action;
- (2) grace - God’s free favor toward ill-deserving people (a favorite term of the apostle, used over hundred times in his letters);
- (3) faith - the instrument that brings us empty-handed to God (see Rm 10:12); and
- (4) saved - equated with new life, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from the plight described in vv. 1–3, liberation, and resurrection.

2:7 The salvation of men and women is a display of divine grace. God did all of this in Christ with a single goal in view: to display the immeasurable riches of his grace, the exhibition of his divine favor for all of history to see, including angels as well as people (1Pt 1:10–12).

2:8–9 The work of salvation is for God’s glory and is not accomplished by human works. The whole process of salvation is not a human achievement, but is an act of God’s goodness. The emphasis is always on Christ, the object of faith, not on the amount of faith. Salvation is by God’s completely unmerited favor. In the Greek text, the grammatical construction of the entire phrase by grace through faith serves as the antecedent of the phrase it is God’s gift. We must not portray grace as God’s part and faith as our part, for all of salvation is a gift from God.

The work of reconciliation is not from yourselves and not from works, so that no one can boast. This prevents the slightest self-congratulation or boasting in the believer. God alone saves.

2:10 Created in Christ Jesus for good works: The work of salvation is a display of divine handiwork. Good works are the fruit of our salvation, not the cause of it. Also, good works are not incidental to God’s plan; they are instead an essential part of his redemption plan for each believer. Good works are demonstrated in gratitude, character, and actions.⁴

References

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2. John Piper, “Our Grand Obligation: Glorify God by Enjoying Him Forever,” *Desiring God*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/our-grand-obligation>.
3. David S. Dockery, *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 85.
4. David S. Dockery, “Ephesians,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1873.

Author Bio

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