

# NOTHING WE CAN DO

Ephesians 2:1-10

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 10, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 2, verses 1 through 10. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Ephesians 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup>among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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There is nothing we can do to make God love us, absolutely nothing. And this might sound like bad news to you, or it might sound like good news. There is absolutely nothing you can do to make God love you. There is nothing you can do to earn his grace. There is no amount of good works you can do to please God. There is no amount of faith you can muster up in order to make God accept you. We are completely helpless. There is nothing we can do.

And there are two ways this might strike you. If we are prideful people, we might not like this. We might think, *There's got to be some reason in me for God to love me.* Maybe this is just because we want to feel good about ourselves. Maybe there's even some competition in it, like we want to have some reason to think that God is more pleased with us than he might be with someone else. In our pride, we want there to be some reason in us for God to accept us. And this is true for all of us. We don't want to hear that we "were dead in trespasses and sins" (2:1). We don't want to admit that we were following the devil (2:2) or that we were "by nature children of wrath" (2:3). We don't like that.

So we might take pride in the past tense. That is, all of these things *were* true, but now they're not. We might take pride in turning our lives around. Not everyone can do that. We might take pride that we came to our senses. Not everyone does. We might even take pride that we confessed our sins. Not everyone has enough humility to do that. We like our pride. So we might not like it when the Scriptures teach that there is absolutely nothing we can do to make God love

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us. We didn't do anything to make him love us, and there's nothing we can do to make him love us more. We might not like that.

Or, if we have come to understand ourselves a little bit, this might be good news. If we know our hearts, if we know that what Paul says is true, if we've tried to turn ourselves around and failed, we might find some comfort in this. And we should. If I didn't do anything to earn God's love, and if I can't do anything to make him love me more, then his love is all because of who he is. And if his love for me is all because of who he is, then it doesn't come and go. I might not have more of it than anyone else, but I also don't have less of it than anyone else. And, in fact, you don't have just part of his love; you have all of it. If there's nothing you can do, then you are free to simply rest in his love.

This is a marvelous place to end up. But our hearts don't want to end up there. Our hearts want to get there for some reason in us. It's kind of like this: a wife wants her husband to love her. And she wants him to say, "I love you because you're beautiful inside and out." She does not want him to say, "You're ugly, dim-witted, and mean; but I love you anyway." That love might be stronger, because it's not based on anything in her, but that's not the love she wants. She wants the love that's based on her goodness and beauty.

But when it comes to the love God has for us, it's the love we don't want. God loves us in spite of our wickedness, rebellion, ugliness, and faithlessness. If we don't want to admit this about ourselves, we'll hate this kind of love. But if we realize all these things to be true, then this love is the most beautiful thing ever. If we are unlovely, then God's love is greater than we could ever imagine. And if we learn to take pride in God's love, instead of ourselves, then we will have the greatest peace and joy.

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We have to go through the painful realization first. Paul says, "You were dead in the trespass and sins in which you once walked" (2:1-2). Who was he talking to? Who is the "you" in that statement? He was writing to the congregation in Ephesus. Most of his letters, like this one, were written to specific congregations. So he's not writing to one individual person. It's not like he's writing to one guy who was remarkably bad compared to the rest of us. He's writing to an entire congregation. The "you" is plural. In Texas it would be "y'all" or even "all y'all." So this included people who were Gentiles before they heard the Gospel. Some of them would have lived very wicked lives. But it also includes Jews, many of whom would have lived very upright and moral lives. And it also includes those who grew up in the Church and never knew anything else. At this early time in Church history, those people would have been fairly young, but they are also included when Paul says, "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." So this holds true for all of us.

We were "following the course of this world" (2:2). When the Bible speaks of the "world" in this negative way, it doesn't mean the rocks, trees, and seas of the earth. That stuff is still good. But this negative meaning of the word "world" means the collective sinful natures of all of us. It's the pattern of temptation and sin you get when you have a whole bunch of sinful natures doing whatever they want and whatever they think is best. The inevitable result is wickedness. The course of this world has been this way since the fall into sin, and it will remain this way until Christ returns in glory. So whatever the trend of the world is, don't follow it. Even if it seems right, it won't be.

Following the course of the world is the same as "following the prince of the power of the air" (2:2). That's the devil. It's an interesting thing to call him: "The prince of the power of the air." Maybe it means that his tempting influence is so pervasive that it's like the air we breathe.

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It's in the air of the culture all around us. The power of the air is that it blows us around like leaves. Or it could also be a bit of a dig at the devil. The power of the air is fleeting. It's here today, but gone in five minutes. Take the three states of matter: solid, liquid, and gas. Air can have some power over some things, but it's weak compared to a liquid or a solid. So the devil's power might blow us around like leaves for a time. And that feels strong to us, but it has virtually no substance when compared to God's power.

The really surprising thing, though, is that Paul says we all followed that power. You followed the devil. I followed the devil. Our hearts still want to follow the devil. We might not feel like that's true. We want to think of ourselves as better than that. But God knows our hearts better than we do, and this is what he says about us. We all once lived this way, "in the passions of our flesh" (2:3). That means our sinful natures.

We were "carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (2:3). So Paul is not just talking about a few really bad people who follow the ways of the devil. But the entire world is this way. All of mankind is this way. Every man, woman, and child naturally follows the devil. This is not the way God designed us, but since the fall into sin, when the serpent planted his lies in our first parents, we have lived believing his lies. We have lived believing that wrong is right, right is wrong, God is wrong, and wrong is god.

Now you might be thinking, *I don't think the world is that wrong. I mean, sure, there's bad stuff, but some people are good, at least some of the time.* Yeah, God's Law restrains wicked behavior and sometimes incentivizes us to do what is right. In his goodness, God limits the wickedness. But Paul is talking about what's buried deep in our hearts. That's where this deadness and rebellion lives. But we still don't recognize it there. And that's the nature of this deadness. If the devil has infected us with lies, so that we think right is wrong and wrong is right, then we will be blind to the reality of our own deadness and rebellion. Part of the nature of sin is that we can't even see it for what it really is. We have moments when our consciences accuse us and we have some awareness of our sin. But we can never see it clearly. The full extent of our depravity has to be revealed to us in Scripture. No matter how bad you think you are, you don't even know the half of it.

It's kind of weird. I have moments when I feel like I'm the worst person I know. And it's unbearable. Then I read scriptures like this one, and I learn that I'm even worse than I think I am. It doesn't make me feel rotten like I do in those moments of despair. But at an intellectual level, the Scriptures teach me that I'm worse than I even think I am. And it's not just me, but it's you too. It's all of us. We all lived in this deadness.

When you think about it, it's an odd way to describe our sin. This is more than ordinary deadness. To be dead usually means that you don't do anything. You can't do anything. And that's true for our sinful natures in the sense that we cannot do anything to believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. To be dead generally means that we cannot do anything, neither bad nor good. But this kind of deadness only means that we cannot do anything good. But we are more than capable of doing evil. We were worse than dead. We were beyond dead. We were living in deadness. The only thing I can think of to compare it to is zombies. They're not normal dead, but living dead. We were dead to God, but alive to everything dead, which only led us further into deadness. It's really hopeless. There was absolutely nothing we could do, and everything we might try to do only makes it worse. That's the nature of sin and unbelief.

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Verse 4 is a huge turning point. “But God ...” And then everything that follows is purely what God did. “Being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us ...” (2:4). He loved us, not because of anything in us, but because of the mercy and love that dwell in him. If there was nothing good in us, then God’s love depends completely on his goodness. His goodness comes up against our wickedness. And we might think that he would destroy us, because that’s what we would do to us if we knew how wicked we are. But God is not wicked like we are. So his goodness is better than we could ever imagine. In his goodness, he looks at us wicked people, and he says, “I must save them.” Saving the wicked is better than destroying the wicked. Here we see just how good and loving God is.

When we deserved to be destroyed for our wickedness, God saved us instead. And we especially see how marvelous this is when we consider what he did to save us. It wasn’t simply a matter of snapping his fingers and changing us from wicked to good. He saved us by being destroyed for our sake. So the Son of God was born a child, like us, but without sin. He lived and grew like us, but without sin. And in perfect innocence, he was nailed to a cross and killed for our sake. And as he died, he bore the sin of the world in his body (1 Peter 2:24). He accepted the curse we deserved. So he removed our sin by paying the price for it. And in this way he overcame the power of sin and death. So he rose from the dead.

And since Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, God made us alive with him. He “raised us up with [Christ] and seated us with him in the heavenly places” (2:6). This is true. We don’t experience it now. But this is true. Your salvation is so secure in Jesus Christ that God can say that you are seated with him in heaven now. That’s the benefit of this being all about what God did and nothing about what we do. If it depends, even a little bit, on what we do, then there’s a pretty good chance we’ll mess it up. But if it all depends on what God has done for you, then your salvation is secure, and you are already seated with Christ in heaven.

It’s not us who brought ourselves to life. We did not decide to come alive. But God did this. God made us alive together with Christ. That’s the thing about dead people. Dead people don’t decide to come to life. They can’t. When Jesus raised bodies from the dead, it was all him. He touched them. He commanded them. And his touch or his words gave life to them. And the same is true for us spiritually.

To be alive means that we have faith. We even have a love for God and a desire to serve him. We experience it alongside our sinful natures as long as we live in this world, so we don’t always feel it, but that faith and love are real. God has made us alive. Even this is not our own doing. We cannot say that we chose this life of faith. Nobody chooses life for themselves. It’s always someone else.

But this is the last stand of pride. Pride, before it’s beaten into submission by the Law, says, “I don’t need God at all.” But when we have lost, and we know that we have lost, and we know that we need God’s grace, the last stand of pride is to say, “I came to my senses and chose to trust in Jesus.” When it becomes unavoidable that we need God’s help, we at least want to say that we had enough wisdom to choose it. And maybe that makes us feel a little superior to all the people who don’t see it. Or maybe it makes us feel just a little bit less helpless. But it’s a lie. It’s the last stand of pride.

We were dead. We were by nature hostile to God. We hated him. He made us alive against our wills. “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (2:8). So what is the gift of God? His grace? Yes. Salvation? Yes. Faith? Yes, even that. Your faith is not your own doing. It is the gift of God. You didn’t choose it. God gave it. That’s what it means that he made you alive. The Holy Spirit worked this in your heart.

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So what's the point? We might think, *If I'm completely helpless, then what if I don't have faith? If I'm completely helpless, then there's nothing I can do to come to life.* That's not the point. Nobody without faith would think that way. No one without faith wants to have faith. The only people who want to trust in Jesus are the people who do. So this should not lead us to despair. Instead, it should be a great comfort to us. Paul says, "Not a result of works ..." That is, not because of anything we do, not with our hands, mind, or heart. "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (2:8-9).

I like to boast. I bet you do too. We want to take pride in something. But pride is the death of us, so God strips it all away. He leaves us with nothing to boast in but Christ. This might hurt, but it's necessary, and it's the only way to have peace and joy. If some part of it still depends on me, if it depends on my wisdom or my choosing, then there's some chance, probably a really big chance, that I will mess it up. But if it depends on God and God alone, then your salvation is secure.

We were dead. But God loved us. And he loved us by suffering death in our place. And he rose from the dead with life to give. So he does. He has made you alive in Christ Jesus. Your place in heaven is secure. And when Christ returns, he will raise your body from all manner of death. And we will live with God in his new creation in eternal blessedness. This is all the gift of God, so take joy in his grace. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.