

Ephesians 2:4 - But God . . .

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[0 : 0 0] Tonight I would like us to look at Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 1 to 7. The words are on the screen, we can read them again together. And you are dead in the trespasses and sins 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, 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 that, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved, and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace, in kindness towards us, in Christ Jesus. A fortnight ago we were looking at Romans 3 21 and we focused on the first two words in that verse, but now. This week we are going to do something similar. Our focus is on Ephesians 2 verse 4, and again it is the first two words, but God. In order to see the significance of these two words we really have to take verses 1 to 7 as a block together, and we're going to just go through these verses together tonight, and to see all that Paul is teaching us in this passage. So we begin with verses 1 to 3, which is what's leading us up to verse 4, a focus point, a focal point, and in these verses as we read, and as you can see, Paul is describing our condition before we came to faith in Jesus. Paul is writing to Christians in Ephesus, and he is basically saying to them, this is what you wear. And the same applies to us as Christians. This is what we wear as well. And of course, if someone is not yet a Christian and reads these verses, this is not what you wear. This is what you still are. Let's look at what Paul says. It's basically split into three sections, and we'll look at these one by one. First of all, Paul says, you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. Now here

Paul is making both a general and a personal description of our condition. In general terms, he is saying that trespasses and sins have left us dead. Now, if you read through the Bible, you will see that that kind of language is nothing new. From the very beginning, the Bible uses the language of death to describe the effect of sin. God told Adam right at the very beginning, he said, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat for in that day. But in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die. And the reason the Bible uses the language of death to describe sin is because sin is deadly. And one of the biggest mistakes of the human race is to play down the deadliness of sin. People look at sin and they think, I can handle that. I can wander away from God's instruction. I can enjoy the pleasure of evil and I'll be fine. Sin isn't that bad. But it's not true. Sin is deadly. The wages of sin is death. And the moment humanity gets itself involved in the work of sin, then we are guaranteed our wages. Death. And that's why without God's intervention, every single human life comes to an end. And usual too. And so in reality, every single person in the world is a dead man or a dead woman walking. Because there's only one destination for us.

And that is where we are heading. And that's exactly what Paul says, because he says, you are dead in your trespasses and sins in which you once walked. And that's emphasizing a really important point, the fact that without Christ, even though we can walk, even though we have physical life in us, spiritually, we are dead. And all too soon, we will be physically dead as well. And it all makes perfect sense. Because God is the giver of life. And sin is turning away from God and rebelling against God. So sin basically involves pushing ourselves away from the source of life from the only source of life that is. And so it's very, very logical. If you push away the source of life, then you are inevitably walking on the path of death. So that is Paul's general point. But he also emphasizes that it is personal. He says, it is the trespasses and sins in which you walked. Paul is getting us to think about our sin and our condition. Then he goes on to talk about the effect that sin has on us and the way in which sin influences us. And firstly highlights the fact that in terms of sin, we are subjected to external pressure. And this external pressure comes in two ways. You are following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sums of disobedience. The first place that that pressure comes from is from the course of this world. Now literally that phrase is to be translated, following the age of this world. And it's referring to the fact that this world lives in reference to itself. The world lives according to its own agenda. It lives thinking only about its own age, and it follows its own course. And we know that that is true because there are so many people who never think about God. And so many people who never think about heaven and who live their lives with no reference to eternity. And even though eternity is so very, very, very long, the world is saying, don't think about that. Focus on your possessions, focus on your pleasure, focus on your own success. The world lives in reference to itself. And do any of us live like that? Do you live like that? Because we're all under pressure to follow that way of thinking, to just think about what matters in the here and now. When the whole world is doing something, it's hard not to be swept up along with its influence. We must guard against the course of this world.

But the second external pressure comes from the prince of the power of the air, that is the devil. Satan is at work trying to make people disobedient, just as he was with Adam and with Eve. And the devil's great goal is to cut you off from God, to cut you off from the source of life. And he is doing that by trying to tempt you and all other humans into disobedience. And that's one of the devil's big lies, that you will be happier if you disobey God. That's one of his big lies. And far too many people listen to it. But notice that Satan is powerful. He is the prince of the power of the air. He is ruler of that realm of darkness. He's not a feeble enemy, far from it. And as I say so many times, you only have to turn on the news to see the chaos that sin is bringing in the world. So there's that external pressure from the world and from Satan. But as Christians, we also face internal pressure from our own flesh. That's the next thing that Paul says, 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. Our own flesh has desires and passions and cravings that are wrong. And we know that's true, isn't it?

How often do we do stupid things? And we think, why did I do that? Why did I say that? Why did I think that? Why did I act in that way? And it's because our own nature is still influenced towards sin. And our flesh leads us astray. And so even without the external pressure, our own minds and our own bodies can spring up all sorts of sinful desires upon us at any moment. And again, we know that that is true from experience. Sometimes we face trouble from outside. But I think almost every single day we battle with our own sin and the things that our own do. And at the end of verse three, Paul reminds us that we are all in this condition.

[10 : 43] In fact, this is how we are born. That's why he says, we are by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. And so that is our situation. And the great emphasis of these verses is the desperate condition of the human race. The odds are stacked against us. You look at how helpless our condition sounds according to these verses. The world is influential and it's leading us astray. The devil is powerful and he's out to get us campaigning for our destruction and our own flesh is enticing. And even on our own, we can create a huge mess. And so Paul is right. We are the walking dead. Our very nature is sinful. And the vital point that arises here is that the dead cannot fix themselves. A dead body cannot revive itself. A dead body cannot help itself. If we are dead in sin, as Paul is saying, then we are totally helpless. Our condition is desperate. And what does Paul say next? But

God. And these two words sum up the truth that lies at the very heart of the Gospel. We are dead in our trespasses and sins. We are helpless. We are lost. We are desperate. But God has intervened. And that's the whole reason why we have the Bible. And that's why we are here tonight. And that is why we have hope. And the whole Christian message is a glorious explanation of these two words. But God. And that's exactly what Paul goes on to say. And in just four short verses, Paul gives us amazing details from verse four to verse seven, describing God's glorious intervention for people like you and people like me. And Paul says seven things. And we're going to look at them together one by one. First of all, Paul tells us something about God's nature. Verse four, but God being rich in mercy. Now notice how perfect the Bible is and how perfect these verses are. Paul has just described the helpless guilt of humanity. The fact that we are sinners before God. We can't stop ourselves. We can't help ourselves. And what is the one thing that people like that need? Mercy. Humanity desperately needs the compassion and pity of God. We need him to be willing to help. And Paul says, God is rich in mercy.

Now, when you are rich, it means you have got plenty. And when you are rich, it means you can afford to be lavish. God's mercy is not a rarity. It is not drying up. It is not scarce. God is rich, rich in mercy to people like you. And that's part of the reason why we have the word but in verse four.

Our helpless state is not the end of the story. It's not the bottom line that we are finished and hopeless. God has intervened because he has a wealth and abundant wealth of mercy.

And you immediately ask the question, why would God be like that? Why would God be merciful to people that Paul has just described in verse three? Why would God be merciful to people like you? Oh, that takes us to the second thing that Paul says. God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us. Notice what Paul is saying here. In his first point, he describes an attribute of God. He's emphasizing that God is merciful. This second point now is telling us about God's attitude towards us. He loves us. In fact, Paul says more than that. He talks not just about God's love. He talks about God's great love. So not only is God merciful, he is loving and that love is not small, that love is not medium, that love is great. And not only that, it is the love with which he has loved us. And that word us there at the end of verse four is so precious and so wonderful because you are in that word. You are in that word us.

[16 : 35] As a Christian, we are loved by God. We are our beloved people. Now, as I said in the morning, sometimes that's hard to believe. And you think to yourself, well, yes, I can understand that for other Christians, but me, I'm worse than most. And I've let God down more than anybody else.

And there's no way that God could love me the way he loves other Christians. Well, if you think like that, look at what Paul says next. Verse five, even when we were dead in our trespasses, when did God start loving you? Was it when you started to get your act together with your life? Was it once his spirit started to improve you? Was it once you began to turn away from sin and turn towards God? Was it once you had done something to make yourself better? No.

God loved you while you were still dead in your trespasses. And that word dead should take a state back to the verses at the start to verses one, two, three, because we were in that desperate state of deadness. And yet there, like that, God loved us. Now Paul is teaching us theology here.

He is saying to us, God is merciful, rich in mercy. He is saying that God is loving and he loves you. And he is teaching us that your condition is not a condition. Now do you know what I mean?

Your sinful state, your helpless condition is not a condition for earning God's love.

[18 : 38] That is such an easy mistake to make to think I need to improve in order for God to love me, not through. Your condition is not a condition. And if you think like that, that you need to improve yourself for God to love you, you've got to listen to Paul's theology here and learn what he is saying. God loves you because he is rich in mercy. And God is rich in mercy because he loves you. What God thinks of you is his business. It is his prerogative. And we should just thank him and praise him with our whole heart that even though we are dead sinners, he has intervened and he loves us. So what has God done to intervene? Well, that's the fourth thing that God says. But God, being rich in mercy because of the love, great love with which he loved us, even while we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. Now this is bringing us to the main verb in Paul's statement. I often say that when you're reading a verse of the Bible, always look for the main verb in that verse because here's a very good example. Paul starts the verse in verse four, he says, but God, and he then gives us three bits of background information. He says God is rich in mercy. That's background information because of the great love with which he loved us. That's background information. Even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, that's background information. Now we come to the main verb, made us alive. So if we just put the background information to one side, the sentence that Paul is saying is, but God made us alive together with Christ. And do you see how it all fits together so beautifully? Paul has just been saying in verse one to three that we are dead and now he says, but God made us alive. It is all so beautifully simple and so clear. God is giving us exactly what we need. What does a dead person need?

Life and God is giving it to us. And just look at that phrase, made us alive together with Christ.

That's referring to what we call regeneration or being born again. And that's exactly what happens to you when you become a Christian. You stop being dead and you become alive. You stop heading to a lost eternity and you have eternal life and you can look forward to eternal life. That's exactly what Jesus promised and it's exactly what God the Father wants for us. Jesus said, for this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the sun and believes in him should have eternal life.

And I will raise him up on the last day. But the only way that that can happen is if you are together with Christ. That is the essential thing. If you just think about the whole Bible for a moment, at the very beginning you have Adam who fell into death. And at the very center of the Bible you have Jesus who was raised to life and conquered death. And the resurrection of Jesus is the great demonstration that the power of death has been broken. But it is Jesus who broke that power and it is Jesus who now reigns over death. And so if we are going to have any chance in the face of death, we need to be united to Jesus. And that is exactly what happens to us when we put our faith in him. Our union with Christ means that because he's alive, we are made alive with him. In other words, it's all because of Jesus. So you've got to make sure you're trusting in him. You've got to make sure you're believing in him. And that's why Paul says the next thing, his fifth point, by grace you have been saved. And it's just a beautiful reminder that Paul almost just throws in there to emphasize the fact that salvation is a gift from God. That's what grace is, an undeserved gift from God. And that is exactly what is so beautifully encapsulated in these two words, but God. It's emphasizing the fact that our salvation is resulting from God's initiative.

He is the one who took action. He is the one who intervened. He is the one who won the victory. He is the one who conquered death and he freely gives the benefits of all that to everyone, every single one who comes to him in faith. Christianity is not about what we do.

[24 : 16] It is about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And that's why the message of the gospel to a broken world is not, you can make yourself better or things might improve or you better just try a bit harder. That's not the message of the gospel at all. The message of the gospel is you are dead in sin, but God has done something about it. And that is why he gets the glory, which is exactly what Paul says in verse eight, for by grace you've been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing. It's the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Paul is emphasizing that our salvation is a beautiful gift. What do you have to do to receive a gift? Do you have to earn a gift? Do you have to work for a gift?

No. You just have to take it. And God is offering it to you tonight if you haven't taken it yet. So Paul is saying lots of amazing things, but he's not finished yet. He has said that God has made us alive and that is wonderful. But God does far more than just restore us to mere living.

It's not just a resuscitation. It is something far greater than that. Verse six, he tells us, and raised us up and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. By faith, we are united to Christ. And Paul has said in verse five that we are alive together with him. And now he says that we have been raised with him and we have been seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. What does that mean? Well, I think it's talking all about status.

[26 : 39] In verses one to three, Paul is emphasizing that we are in a desperate state. But now, in Christ, we enjoy the most privileged status. And as you can see in verse six, Paul is telling us two things. First, we are raised up with Jesus. And so that means when Jesus is raised up, he doesn't leave us behind. As Jesus takes up his exalted position, as king over all creation, as Lord of all, we are allowed to go all the way up there with him. As a Christian, you are united to Jesus, which means he will never leave you behind. It means that where he belongs, you belong.

Can you see how glorious that is? Where Jesus belongs, you belong. And that's emphasized by the second thing Paul says, we are seated with him. And at one level, that means that we share the extraordinary privilege of having a share in the status that Christ now enjoys. And we know that that is true, because we are his brothers and sisters. You as a Christian are Christ's brother, or Christ's sister. And he is not ashamed to say that. He's not ashamed to call you his brother, not ashamed to call you his sister. That's Jesus talking about you. And you are a co-heir with him, because his father is our father. You think of everything that the father wants to lavish on the son. You are a co-heir, not a secondary heir, not a semi heir, a co-heir with Christ.

The level you are at, the level he is at, is the level that he will bring you to. And I suppose in maybe a simpler way of thinking about it, it's a wonderful reminder that as a Christian, Jesus is keeping a space for you in heaven. We are seated with him. He's keeping your seat, because you belong with him. So I hope you can see what Paul is saying here.

He starts off by saying that we were dead. So this is over down here, as far down as we can possibly be, hopeless, dead, helpless. But God looks upon us in mercy. And God loves us with a great love. And God has taken dead people and he has made us alive. And he has raised us up.

And he is going to seat us with Jesus. And so there's this amazing upward trajectory in what Paul is saying. He is taking us from the deadness of verse one, all the way up to the glory and the majesty and the wonder of sitting side by side with Jesus in glory for eternity. God is just elevating us and lifting us and lifting us and lifting us and bringing us to such extraordinary heights. And yet Paul is not finished yet. Because he's got one more thing to say.

- [31 : 04] God wants to make us alive. God wants to raise us up. God wants to seat us with Christ. And then it is in order that in the coming ages, he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. What's the main verb in that sentence? Or that phrase?

What's the main verb? Show. In the coming ages, he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us. This phrase is telling us that God wants to show you something.

God wants to show you something. Do you ever have that feeling where you're just desperate to show somebody something? Maybe you've got something new or maybe you've made something or whatever it may be. You're desperate to show someone. Well, God wants to show you something. He wants to show you the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards you.

God wants to be immeasurably good to you for all eternity. That is God's ultimate plan for you. And you think why?

It's because by faith in Jesus Christ, you are a child of God. And all good fathers want to show immeasurable kindness to their children.

- [33 : 22] And that's why it says, what no eye has seen nor ear heard nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him. And we're just getting a glimpse of it here.

God wants to shower us with immeasurable kindness and grace. And Paul wants these effusions to see this and to understand it. And Paul wants us to see it and understand it as well. That's been his prayer in chapter one. You read from verse 16 in chapter one. He says, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he's called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe.

Do you see what Paul is saying there? He's praying that you, as a Christian, would see just how good God is going to be to you, and just how much God has promised you, and just how immeasurable and how glorious our inheritance is through Jesus Christ, the one whom he raised from the dead and seated at his right hand in the heavenly places.

And all of this means that when you get to the very top of God's plans for you, you are just going to find that there is immeasurably more, immeasurably more. It's really exciting, isn't it? It's just amazing.

And notice that in all of this, Paul is looking ahead to the age to come. See what he says there? In the coming ages. Now remember what I said about verse two. It says, following the course of this world. Now literally that is following the age of this world. And so Paul is saying you are once following the age of this world, but now in the ages to come, in God's eternal glory, you won't have all the muck and sin and wreckage of the world, but you will have the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us, in Christ Jesus.

- [36 : 16] The contrast couldn't be clearer. And it's almost like Paul is saying to us, do you really want to follow the age of this world and miss out on all that God promises for the ages to come?

Do you? Paul is taking us to immense heights. And these four versions, he's just opened us, opened up the floodgates of blessing that God promises to you and to every single person who puts their faith in Christ. Do you know that as a Christian, and if you become a Christian, Jesus is keeping your seat beside him in glory. It's just amazing the promises that God gives us.

And these promises and all that rich theological teaching is all ours because of two wonderful words, but God. We were dead, but God. Now that's really what lies at the heart of being a Calvinist.

Calvinist or a Reformed believer is somebody who holds onto that teaching with all their heart.

Because some people look at their condition before God and they're aware of their sinfulness, and they say, but I, but I have done this, but I haven't done that, but I have worked my way up, but I have tried. Some people try to come to God and they say, but I, I have done this.

[38 : 32] Other people look at their sinful condition and they say to God, but we, you've done something, I've done something. You've offered me this and I've responded and I've made my decision and I've grasped it and I've done what I need to do and now we're working together. I've done what I need to do. You've done what we need to do. They look to God and they say, but we, I've done something, you've done something. The Calvinist, the Reformed faith, the faith of our church and the faith of Scripture looks at ourselves and their sin and says, but God. And I want you all to hold onto these two words. Hold onto these two words every single day of your lives. When you feel that you are totally unworthy of being a child of God, you need to say to yourself, but God is rich in mercy.

When the devil tries to tell you that you are a waste of space, you need to tell yourself, but God loves me with a great love. When you feel that you are nowhere near good enough, you need to tell yourself, but God intervened even when I was still dead in trespasses.

When you feel like your sins are plaguing you and that the devil's just harassing you and that the world is tempting you and your flesh is enticing, you tell yourself, but God saves by grace. When you feel isolated and alone, tell yourself, but God has united me to Christ. When you are hurt, when you are scared, when you are broken, when life is incredibly difficult, you need to say to yourself, but God will raise me with Christ. And when this world brings tear to your eyes, you need to say to yourself, but God has got far better things for me in the ages to come. We need to hold onto these words. And if you are not yet a Christian, then you need to hear these words more than anything else because verses 1 to 3 is describing you. The non-Christian is lost and dead, but God saves non-Christians. And the whole point of the gospel is to change unbelievers into believers. Every believer was an unbeliever once. And the whole point of this message is to call you away from the broad road that leads to destruction and to turn you around from the path that leads to a lost eternity and to set you on the way of life, which will lead to immeasurable riches in kindness and grace from God. You have got to make sure you grasp these two words.

You might have made a lot of mistakes in your life. Maybe you have. You might have let opportunities pass by. You might not understand everything. And you might be worried about what the future holds.

You might have all sorts of things holding you back. But God will save you if you just ask.

[43 : 08] All you need to hear is these two words, but God. That is our hope. And that is the glory of the gospel. Amen.

Let us pray.