

I invite you to open your bibles this morning, to today's scripture text, which can be found in the book of Ephesians, the 2nd Chapter, verse 1 - 9. Which can be found on page ___ in your pew bibles. Today we conclude our Advent series "The Traditions of Christmas." Today's scripture reveals a lesson of the Hope that Jesus brings us all.

Eph 2:1-10

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

As we now find ourselves on the eve of the most precious holiday of the year, most people will find their minds filled with hope thinking about the presents they may receive tomorrow, on Christmas day. The hope of receiving a gift. Adults and children alike have given into the excitement of this tradition. This can cause restlessness at bed time as we lay there with great anticipation of what could possibly be waiting for us beneath our wonderfully decorated Christmas tree. The hope for a train set, the hope for a bicycle, the hope for a doll or perhaps a little puppy dog. We are filled with excitement as we hope to receive a present from someone close, perhaps some small or grand item, or perhaps even something as simple as the company of family, or a loving gesture intended to lift up our spirits. Regardless of the gift, the motivation for giving is the common reason; an outward expression of caring affection intended to reveal the level of love we hold for the gift receiver. What act of love could possibly give us more hope than this? The hope we feel from receiving material gifts can only pale in comparison the real gift that comes on Christmas day. The gift that gives the whole world hope, and that is the gift of God's grace to the world, through the gift of his only son, the Son of God, who came as the Son of Man.

The primary reason for our gift giving tradition stems back two-thousand years ago. Gift giving is intended to remind us of the three wise men that traveled to see prophesy fulfilled, the coming of the Son of Man, Immanuel, God with us, the incarnation of God, who would come to us in the form of a little baby, named Jesus. The reminder of these three men, who came bearing gifts of Frankincense, Gold and Myrrh. Gifts presented to the Son of Man on the very first Christmas morning.

Christmas itself is really about a big present that God gave the world about 2000 years ago - Jesus! One of the most famous Bible verses, John 3:16, says: 'God loved the world so much, that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not be lost but have eternal life.'

This brings us to our scripture text which could easily be described as one of the greatest passages, perhaps the greatest passage in all the bible on the subject of the grace of God. God's Amazing grace. The greatest present one could ever receive. From this passage we discover six words, that contain the whole gospel. Six words, which if you know them, if you know what they mean, you know the whole gospel of Jesus Christ.

Beginning in verse 1.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins

You were dead. First two words; you were. **You, were.** This is God's indictment. It is God's diagnosis. This is God's declaration of the *whole human race*. Apart from grace, *you were*. Everything he says in the first three verses, *you were*, and if you don't know Jesus Christ *you still are*. **You were.** That's where we have to begin. **You were.** That's the need of grace. You were dead.

Our second pair of words, down in verse 4.

(Eph 2 4-5)

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved.

“But” verse four begins, because of his great love for us, “God.”

But God. You were, but God. You were dead, but God. You were lost, but God. You were slaves to sin, but God. You followed the ways of the devil, **but God**. God stepped in when you were dead, and he did something.

Then the third pair of words in verse 8.

(Eph 2:8) 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith

This is how we receive God’s grace, through faith. It goes like this; You were, but God, through faith. Everything you need to know about the gospel is in those six, one syllable words. Understand it, and you’ve got the message. You were, but God, through faith. You were, but God, through faith. Say that with me, you were, but God, through faith. Say it again, you were, but God, through faith. That’s the gospel in six simple words. Learn those words, and what they mean, and you will know the gospel. You will be able to share it with someone else.

The first two words describe our true condition apart from God’s grace. The words “you were” describe not only what we used to be, they also describe the current condition of everyone in the world who is not saved. That condition, as we will see in a few moments, is truly hopeless.

The second two words tell us how grace works. The phrase “but God” announces the world’s greatest rescue mission when God the Father, our Creator, took on human flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ to perform the work of salvation.

The final two words explain how we come into contact with God’s grace. It is “through faith” and only through faith. It is not faith plus works or faith plus anything else. It is faith alone that brings the blessings of grace to us.

Rightly understood, the whole gospel is in those six words: You were...But God...Through faith. God made it simple so that anyone could understand it and so all of us could share it with someone else.

Our subject today is the gift of the grace of God. Perhaps a quote from the French philosopher Pascal will put things in their proper context: *“To make a man a saint, grace is absolutely necessary and whoever doubts it, does not know what a saint is or what a man is.”* One phrase hangs in the mind: *“Grace is absolutely necessary.”* If you doubt that, you don’t know what a saint is or what a man is, and I might add, you don’t know what grace is either.

A fine book that I would highly recommend to you to read is *“What’s So Amazing About Grace?”* by Phillip Yancey. In an early chapter he comments that grace is the *“last great word.”* What he means by that is that there are many great words in the English language that once had a great meaning or a great heritage, and over the centuries the meaning has been eroded, or lost across the generations and the centuries. But he says that *“grace”* is the last of the *“great words”*, meaning that today, even after hundreds of years it has retained something of its original meaning: which is *“free and undeserved bounty.”*

He explains it this way: when we sit down for a meal, we pray, we *“say grace”* to thank God for our food. Something that is offered at no cost is said to be *“gratis”* or *“for grace.”* Someone gives us a gift we don’t expect we express our gratitude to them, a form of grace. We are *“grateful”* for a kindness done by another person. To show our thanks we offer a *“gratuity.”* And when we have overdue books from the library, we may return them at no charge during a *“grace period.”*

It is commonly said that Christianity is supremely a religion of grace. And that is certainly true. We sing about grace, we write poems about grace, we name our churches and our children after grace. Every year parents name their daughters Grace.

But for all that, grace is not well understood and often not really believed. We use the word a great deal but rarely think about what it means. It's probably true that most of us infrequently think about God's grace. For every discussion we have about grace, we have a dozen about the church budget or the church programs or more likely, whether or not we'll live to see the Indians win the World Series. If you ask us, we certainly believe in grace, but outside of the worship services, the word is rarely on our lips.

Yancey points out that part of our problem is in the nature of grace itself. Grace is scandalous. Hard to accept. Hard to believe. Hard to receive. We all have a certain skepticism when a telemarketer tells us, "I'm not trying to sell you anything. I just want to offer you a free trip to Hawaii." Automatically we wonder, "What's the catch?" because we have all been taught that "there's no free lunch." So when somebody tells us that God's going to give us something for free, that just goes against the grain of everything, because we are not used to believing that anything can be truly free.

The second reason we have trouble with grace is because of optimism about our own abilities. We tend to think more of ourselves than we should, and less of God than we really should. So when we come to think about something being free, it's humbling to be told that there is nothing that you can do. Often times, people will give us something, and our temptation is to take out our check book and say,

“here, let me give you something for this.” Because it’s a real humiliating, and a humbling thing for somebody to just give you something free of charge. There is something in us that says, “I really need to pay for this because I don’t want this on my conscience.”

Grace shocks us in what it offers. It is truly not of this world. It frightens us with what it does for sinners. Grace teaches us that God does for others what we would never do for them. It teaches us that God will save anybody. That’s troublesome for us, because we don’t like the idea of some people being saved.

Let’s be honest, there are some people we know that are so rotten, so mean, so degenerate, that if we just had the chance, we would pull the lever on the trap door and just laugh as they fell down and sizzled in the flames of hell. Grace tell us that God not only saves good sinners, he also saves bad sinners. He does for others what we would never do for them. We would save the not-so-bad. God starts with prostitutes and then works downward from there. Grace is a gift that costs everything to the giver and nothing to the receiver. It is given to those who don’t deserve it, barely recognize it, and hardly appreciate it.

Too many religious people are like the Pharisee who prayed in Luke 18:11, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even this tax collector.”. He might as well have said, “I thank God I’m not like heinous offenders.” Well, it’s true. He wasn’t like them, and he wasn’t saved either. He went home still in his sins while the hated tax collector ended up justified by God.

As long as I think I am better than other people, I am not ready to be saved from my sin because I have not yet considered how great my sin really is. Jesus did not come to save “semi” sinners or “partial” sinners or “not-so-bad” sinners. As long as you feel the need to put some kind of qualifying adjective before the word “sinner,” you aren’t ready to come to Jesus because you won’t see your need for the grace of God.

That’s why Romans 3:22 says, “There is no difference.” And that’s why the next verse says, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” We’re all in the same boat—like it or not.

The words of Jesus come to mind Luke 5:32. “I did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance”. That is a truly astounding statement if you think about it. On one level he might be saying that if anyone is truly righteous, that they have never sinned at all, that person doesn’t need a Savior because they have never committed any sins that need forgiveness. As a theoretical point that statement is entirely true. But it’s a closed category since there is no one outside of Jesus himself who ever lived a sinless life.

The statement might also mean that Jesus came to save those who will admit their true sinfulness before God. If a person says, “I’m not a sinner,” the words of Jesus will mean nothing to him. Even Jesus can’t save a person who won’t admit he needs to be saved. As long as you and I cling to our self-righteousness, we will be hopelessly lost and there is nothing that can be done to help us.

Jesus is the only righteous man who ever lived. He was pure, holy, perfect in every way. He never sinned, not even one time. Though he was severely tempted, he never gave in. All the rest of us fall so far short that we cannot begin to be compared to him. He is the only righteous man ever to walk this earth.

And we crucified him. His reward for doing God's will was a bloody Roman cross. Here is the wonder of grace at work. From the murder of a perfect man came God's plan to rescue the human race.

This, I think, is what Phillip Yancey was driving at when he called grace "scandalous" and "shocking." Indeed, it is. To the human heart no doctrine is more repugnant than the doctrine of grace because it presupposes a common human condition that we don't like to admit.

With that as our background, let's return to our text. Ephesians 2:1-9 is the most extensive statement in the Bible about grace. It tells us how God saves dead people. Recall our 6 words, You were, but God, through faith.

I. Grace Needed—"You were" *(Ephesians 2:1-3).*

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath

Why do we need God's grace? Because all men and all women are by nature spiritually dead and separated from God. We must begin at this basic starting point for biblical theology.

When God looks down from heaven, the whole world looks like a cemetery to him. All he sees are dead people. Above every corpse is a three-word epitaph: "DEAD THROUGH SIN."

In what sense are human beings "dead" even though they are alive? Because of sin we are separated from God. We are unable to know God personally and we can't do anything about our condition. To make matters worse, we are dead and we don't know it.

When God looks down from heaven, he sees our world as a vast graveyard filled with the living dead. Unbelievers appear to be alive. They laugh, they talk, they plan, they fight, they marry, they dream of the future, and one day they die. But they are dead even while they are alive.

This is the human condition apart from God. It is true of all people without exception. Apart from grace, we are all born dead. Which is why, when God wants to save someone, he first finds a dead person.

II. Grace Given—"But God" *(Ephesians 2:4-7).*

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus

Note the two little words in verse 4: "But...God." Our salvation hangs entirely on those two words. We were dead...But God! We were enslaved...But God! We were trapped...but God! We were self-destructing...but God! We were lost in sin...but God!

Now take note of three words in verse 4 —love, mercy, and grace. Love is that in God which causes him to reach out to his creatures in benevolence. Mercy is God withholding punishment. And grace? Grace is the unmerited favor of God.

Think of it this way. Imagine a vast reservoir of God's love. As it begins to flow toward us, it becomes a river of mercy. As it cascades down upon us, the mercy becomes a torrent of grace.

This verse offers three words which answer to the desperate state of mankind: Love, Mercy, Grace.

Here's a good way to remember the difference between mercy and grace. Mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve—Judgment. Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve—Salvation.

The picture of a torrent of grace rushing upon us is especially appropriate since grace always comes down from God to man. Grace never goes up; it always comes down. Grace by definition means that God gives us what we don't deserve and could never earn.

III. Grace Received—"Through faith" *(Ephesians 2:8-9).*

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

In these two verses we discover how grace is communicated to the human heart. It does not come by works, by religion, or by anything we might conceive as "earning" God's grace. Grace saves us through faith. Nothing more, nothing less.

Something in us always wants to add to God's free grace. It's humbling to admit that we can do nothing to earn our deliverance from sin. But anytime we add anything to grace, we subtract from its meaning.

Grace must be free or else it is not grace at all. Free grace? Of course. What other kind could there be? Consider the three key words of verse 8: grace, saved, faith. Grace is the source, Faith is the means, and Salvation is the result. Or you might say that Grace is the reservoir, Faith is the channel, and Salvation is the stream that washes my sin away.

And all of it is the gift of God, even the faith that lays hold of God's grace. Even our faith is not of us. It too is part of God's gift. As Martin Luther said, our situation is so hopeless that salvation must come from "another place." That's why the Reformers talked about "alien righteousness." That means a righteousness that comes from outside ourselves. We are not saved by what we do but by what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Here's Luther on faith: *"God creates faith in the human heart the same way that He created the world. He found nothing and created something."* Thus, every part of our salvation is a work of God from first to last.

We are saved by grace through faith: Apart from works, apart from all human "goodness", That salvation is freely given and is received by faith alone.

This view of grace is hard for good people to accept because it means we must give up our "goodness" in order to be saved. We must admit that nothing we have done matters in the least when it comes to being forgiven by God.

In the words of an old hymn, we must lay our “deadly doing” down. God has designed our salvation so that he alone gets the glory!

What would heaven be like if you had to earn your way there? It would be like going to one of those \$100-per-plate political dinners where people stand around bragging about how much they gave to help their man win the election. “I gave \$5,000.” “So what? I gave \$10,000.” “Big deal. I gave \$50,000.” “Move out of the way, pipsqueak. I own this guy. He’s got \$300,000 of my money.” And so it goes.

Heaven would be just like that if you had to earn your way there. “I was chairman of the elder board.” “I made tapes for blind people.” “I gave a million dollars to world missions.” “I helped old ladies cross the street.” “I changed dressings for burn victims.” As good as those things are, they will not help forgive even one sin. They will not save you or help save you.

Wouldn’t it be horrible to spend eternity listening to people brag about what they did to earn their salvation? Heaven would not be heaven in that case. Someone would put his arm around Jesus and say, “You and me, Jesus, we did it. You died on the cross and I baked the cookies.”

Thank God, it’s not like that. When Jesus died on the cross, he paid the full price for your salvation. It doesn’t matter whether you baked the cookies or not. Jesus paid the price all by himself. Entrance into heaven is limited to those who trust Jesus Christ—and him alone—for their salvation.

That’s why God alone gets the glory in your salvation. Jesus did all the work when he died on the cross.

In the end grace means that no one is too bad to be saved. God specializes in saving really bad people. Do you have some things in your background that you would be ashamed to talk about in public? Fear not. God knows all about it, and his grace is greater than your sin.

Grace also means that some people may be too good to be saved. That is, they may have such a high opinion of themselves that they think they don't need God's grace. They may admit they are sinners but they don't admit they are spiritually dead. They may think they're sick because of sin but not truly dead. God's grace cannot help you until you are desperate to receive it.

Which brings me to my final point. How do you find God's grace? Just ask for it. That's all. It's really that simple. The more you feel your need for grace, the better candidate you are to receive it. Hold out your empty hands and ask God for his grace. You will not be turned away.

It's never too late. Though your sins be as scarlet, God says they will be white as snow. This is the miracle, the wonder, the scandal, the shock of God's grace. It truly is "out of this world" for no one in this world would have thought of something like this.

Here is good news for sinners. Free Grace! Free Grace! Free Grace! Shout it, sing it, tell it, share it. And above all else, believe it, for in believing, you will be saved.

When we get to heaven, there will be no contest to see who was the most deserving of God's grace. After all, we were all dead to start with. There will only be one contest in heaven. When we look back and see what we were before, when we see the pit from which he rescued us, when we recall how confused we were, when we remember how God reached out and dragged us into his family, and how he held us in his hand, and when we see Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us, the only contest will be to see which of us will sing the loudest, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

Gracious Father,

Thank for giving us your Son, Jesus to be the Savior of the world,

As we receive your gift of grace may we open our hearts and let him in.

Forgive us for the times when our self-righteousness,

has kept us from seeking your presence in our lives.

Give us the strength to repent from our sins, to ask for your forgiveness,

and to realize that we are but walking dead without Christ.

We pray that you will continue to pour out your love, mercy, and grace

Upon our lives so that we may be restored into a life that pleases you.

As we leave here today, into a dark hopeless world, let all those

who we encounter hear your gospel through our words and deeds.

Above all, may you be glorified, in all that we do,

through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit working within us.

Amen.