Ephesians

Lesson 3

**Intro**

Ephesians’ first chapter emphasizes the incredible spiritual benefits God the Father has provided to Paul and the Ephesians through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and Paul prays that their relationship with God the Father would deepen and that their appreciation would grow for: (1) the hope provided by their calling, the value of being part of Christ’s inheritance, and the awesome power God the Father has already exerted by exalting Jesus and makes available to believers.

**Eph. 2:1-3 The Ephesians dreadful past spiritual condiction**

“And you being dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the age of this world” Paul transitions from his prayer for the Ephesians by reviewing the Ephesians’ past. “in your transgressions and sins” has the sense of a location or sphere. “walked” refers to a pattern of behavior that characterizes a person, like a lifestyle. Before coming to faith, the Ephesians were spiritually dead in a sphere or realm characterized by their lifestyle of conscious disobedience to God. Their lifestyle of sinful behavior fit this age, which means the time before Jesus returns, in which the “world” claims authority over human society. In this context, “world” includes both spiritual and human efforts to exercise authority apart from (and thus in rebellion against) God’s authority.

“according to the ruler over the realm of the air, the spirit that now works in the sons of disobedience.” The “world” has a leader—the ruler over the realm of the air. This is the devil or Satan. In Greco-Roman thought, what we would call the atmosphere was considered to be less pure than the heavens, and thus a dwelling place for evil spirits. The OT and NT assume that, for most of history, Satan has also had access to heaven and earth. (Job 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:8.) I am not aware of another verse describing Satan in this way. Paul does use various terms for the devil, including “god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4), devil (Eph. 4:27, 6:11), and Satan (2 Cor. 12:7; 2 Thess. 2:9). In this context, “spirit” likely means an inward attitude. “Sons of disobedience” are people whose behavior is characterized by rebellion against God’s authority. Such people display the same attitude as Satan, the leader of this realm.

“among whom also we all were formerly living in the desires of our flesh doing the wishes of the flesh and the reasoning processes” Paul acknowledges that everyone, including himself, once shared this spiritually dead condition and rebellious lifestyle. He then describes another aspect of this spiritual problem: the desires of the flesh. The term “flesh” can simply refer to a human or animal’s physical body. This usage usually has no moral connotations. But Paul often uses it figuratively to mean the part of a human that is fallen and opposed to God. (Rom. 8:5-8; Gal. 5:16-17.) Here, Paul says that this part of humans internally generates desires that result in thoughts and choices opposed to God.

In sum, Paul identifies three powerful forces driving or leading unbelievers away from God: (1) the internal desires of the flesh; (2) the authority structure referred to as the “world,” including human institutions as large as the Roman Empire and simple peer pressure; and (3) Satan, the leader of this “world.” These three forces create a spiritually dead realm in which all humans, including Paul and the Ephesians exist, prior to conversion.

“and we were by nature children of wrath as even the rest” Paul asserts that, by nature, heritage, or descendants, he and the Ephesians were children of wrath. In this figurative sense, “children” means to have a close relationship with something. As spiritually dead unbelievers living in this sinful realm, Paul and the Ephesians were by their very nature closely related to God’s wrath, not God Himself. The word “nature” and phrase “as even the rest” indicate that this plight afflicts all unbelieving humans, not just Paul and the Ephesians.

**Eph. 2:4-10**

“But God being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in transgressions made us alive together with Christ—by grace you are saved” The conjunction “but” indicates a transition from the Ephesians’ past plight to a description of their spiritual rescue. Paul says that God is rich in mercy. God is not just angry at disobedience, He simultaneously is able to have an abundant amount of pity or compassion. God has great love as well. Paul emphasizes that this love manifested itself in action by using a verb as well as a noun. “Even when we were dead in transgressions” reminds us that God’s abundant mercy and great love were directed at disobedient humans. The manifestation of this abundant mercy and great love toward Paul and the Ephesians is that God transformed them from spiritually dead to spiritually alive with Christ. Paul then interjects another divine characteristic critical to salvation: “by grace you have been saved.” The instrumentality of Paul and the Ephesians’ spiritual rescue was God’s grace—his unmerited favor and divine enablement.

“and raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.” After interjecting that salvation is by grace, Paul returns to the description of how God transformed Paul and the Ephesians from spiritually dead to alive, and adds that God the Father resurrected or raised up believers with Christ. Paul sometimes talks about a future, physical and bodily resurrection. (1 Cor. 15:22-23, 51-52.) But here and in Colossians, Paul describes a spiritual resurrection that has already occurred through believers’ identification with Christ. (Col. 2:12, 3:1.) Not only have believers been raised with Christ, Paul says God seated them with Christ in the heavenly realms. (Col. 3:1.) Again, Paul is not saying that he or the Ephesians have literally been sitting in heaven. It is Christ who has literally done so, and believers have figuratively or spiritually done so because God the Father chooses to identify them with Christ.

Paul ends the clause with the phrase “in Christ.” This phrase emphasizes that it is the believers’ union with Christ in God’s sight that results in this incredible spiritual transformation.

“in order that he might demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Paul implicitly acknowledges that believers are not currently experiencing those blessings in a physical sense—and that nonbelievers cannot observe these things to be true of believers--by stating that God did these things so that in the future he could kindly demonstrate, or show, the surpassing or extraordinary abundance of grace He has directed to believers through their identification with Christ. In other words, in the future, God will make these things that are currently spiritual truths—that believers have been raised and seated with Christ through their identification with Christ—plain to believers and nonbelievers.

“For by grace you are saved through faith.” Discussion of this incredible spiritual transformation seems to prompt Paul to again exclaim that this salvation occurs by God’s grace—His unmerited favor and divine enablement. Paul adds another means—through faith. “Faith” means to trust, have confidence in, or rely upon.

“and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Commentators debate what “this” refers to. Its gender does not match the immediately preceding nouns, so it seems best to interpret it as referring to the entire process of salvation described in the preceding verses. Under this view, Paul is saying that salvation does not have its source or origin in the Ephesians (or any other human). Instead, it is a gift from God. Paul underscores the point by adding that salvation is not from “works.” In this context, “works” means any and all human effort to justify oneself. The result is that no human can boast about their spiritual status. At most, humans can only boast in God or Christ’s work, and praise or thank God for His gracious gift of salvation. In sum, this verse strongly emphasizes that a believer’s transformation from spiritually dead to alive with Christ has NOTHING to do with human effort or merit. It is purely a gift from God based on grace that a believer simply accepts by faith, i.e., relying on Christ’s righteousness. Moreover, we know from other verses that humans require God’s help just to have faith; no one seeks God and exercises faith of their own accord absent divine assistance. (John 6:44; Romans 3:11.) On the other hand, the fact that faith is part of salvation explain why not all humans are believers. As far as I know, this strong assertion that salvation is based on grace and not human effort is unique to Christianity.

“For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand in order that we might walk in them.” Paul then engages in some wordplay. He asserts that believers are God’s/His workmanship. In Greek, “his” is at the beginning of the phrase for emphasis. The word “for” connects this clause to the preceding material, where Paul has argued salvation is not the product of human work. Rather, redeemed believers are the products of God’s work. The word translated as workmanship can refer to artwork or well-crafted work. God’s workmanship was “created in Christ Jesus.” The NT reserves the word translated “created” for God’s creative acts. This implies that conversion/God’s workmanship is not just a facelift; believers can be described as new creations. (See 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15.) This transformation occurs “in Christ Jesus” again emphasizing the importance of our identification with Christ to the salvation process. One purpose of this transformation was “for good works.” (See Titus 3:1-2, 8.) Titus 3 indicates that “good works” would be things consistent with peace, consideration of others, humility, and beneficial for everyone. “Good works” would not include thing associated with foolishness, disobedience to God, malice, envy, hatred, wordly passions, quarreling, and trivial arguments. Romans 12:9-13 provides another good list, but Paul will also address how Christians should live in the second half of Ephesians. These good works were “prepared beforehand,” indicating that not only did God predestine believers for salvation, He has specific good works for them to do after salvation. Paul experienced this truth, as Jesus was able to foretell what Paul would do with the rest of his life at the moment of Paul’s conversion. (Acts 9:15-16; 26:15-18.) As unbelievers we “walked,” or had a lifestyle characterized by, sins and disobedience. As believers, we are to “walk” or have a lifestyle characterized by the good works God has prepared for each of us. Paul’s view of salvation is the opposite of common sense. God does not save people based on good things they have done. Rather, God saves spiritually dead people by grace through faith so that those with faith can then live post-conversion lives characterized by good works.

**Application**

The reminder that we were all spiritually dead and saved by grace through faith rather than merit, should help us maintain humility and a forgiving attitude toward others as we strive to do good works.

The message that God has prepared good works for believers should be sobering to anyone who thinks that making a verbal acknowledgment of faith in Jesus on one occasion means they do not need to put any effort into pleasing God for the rest of their lives. Neither this passage nor others suggest that a genuine conversion should be followed by a complete absence of good works. (John 15:1-6; Rom. 7:4; Gal. 5:22-24; James 2:14-26.)

On the other hand, for anyone who appreciates their sinfulness and hopes to accomplish something significant with their life, it should be encouraging to hear that God has graciously transformed our spirit from dead to alive with Christ and has prepared truly good works of eternal significance for every believer.