

The Book of Ephesians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: From Death to Life: By Grace Through Faith

Ephesians 2:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Ephesians 2:1–10 is the single most important passage in this study to handle with doctrinal precision, because verses 8 and 9 are the chief proof text for the doctrine of salvation by faith only. The teacher must let Paul say everything he actually says, no more and no less. Paul does say, with full force, that salvation is by grace, that it is the gift of God, that it is not earned, and that no one may boast. We must never blunt that. Salvation is not a wage we collect for good behavior or law-keeping. But Paul does not say faith only, and he does not stop at verse 9. He continues, in the same breath, to verse 10: we are created in Christ Jesus for good works. The teacher's task is to hold grace and obedient faith together exactly as Paul does.

The key is to see what works Paul excludes. He excludes works of human merit and works of law by which a person might earn salvation and boast in himself. He is not excluding the obedient response of faith that God Himself commands, the hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ through which we receive the free gift. Baptism, for example, is not a meritorious work that earns salvation; it is the appointed moment when the believer, in faith, is buried with Christ and raised to new life (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27). It is grace received, not wages earned. The same faith that saves is the faith that obeys (Galatians 5:6; James 2:24).

Yet this passage is not only a battleground; it is a wonder. The aim is also to let students feel the weight of but God. They were dead, and God made them alive while they had nothing to offer. The teacher should guard against a cold, merely argumentative handling of a passage that should melt the heart. We are trophies of mercy, God's own workmanship, created for a life of good works. Teach so that students leave both doctrinally clear and deeply grateful.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verses 1 through 3 Paul says we were dead in our trespasses and sins, following the course of this world and by nature deserving wrath. What does Paul mean when he says we were dead, and why is this diagnosis the necessary starting point for understanding salvation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's diagnosis is stark: you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked. The deadness is spiritual, a separation from the life of God and a bondage to sin, the world, and the devil (vv. 2–3). Apart from Christ, no one can give themselves spiritual life any more than a corpse can raise itself.

Handle the word dead with care, because it is sometimes pressed into the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity, the idea that fallen people are so dead that they cannot even respond to the gospel unless God first regenerates them unconditionally. Paul's point is the seriousness of our lostness and our inability to save ourselves, not that we are incapable of hearing and answering God's call. Throughout Scripture God commands all people to repent and believe, and treats them as genuinely able to respond (Acts 17:30; Acts 2:37–41). The gospel call is real and universal.

So the diagnosis humbles without leading to fatalism. We were truly dead and could not earn or initiate our rescue, yet the living God speaks, and by His grace, through the gospel, the dead hear the voice of the Son of God and live (John 5:25). The starting point is honesty about our condition, which makes grace amazing rather than expected.

Help the class resist the modern instinct to soften the diagnosis. Only people who know they were dead can truly treasure the words but God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual death as separation from God and bondage to sin
- Our inability to save or raise ourselves
- The difference between this and Calvinistic total inability to respond
- The genuine, universal gospel call to all people
- Honest diagnosis as the foundation for amazing grace

Discussion Prompts

- Why is an honest picture of our former deadness necessary for understanding grace?
- How does our being dead in sin differ from the idea that we cannot respond to God at all?
- How does this diagnosis humble us without leading to despair?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul describes a former way of life marked by following the crowd and our own passions. Where do you still feel the pull of the course of this world, and what helps you recognize when you are drifting back toward old patterns?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul describes the old life as following the course of this world and the desires of body and mind. The pull he names is conformity, going along with the crowd and with our own cravings. This question asks students to notice where that pull still works on them.

Even after coming to Christ, the undertow of the old patterns remains. It shows up in small compromises, in the desire to fit in, in appetites that quietly take charge. Naming the specific pull is the first step to resisting it.

Encourage practical vigilance. Help students identify the early warning signs of drift, perhaps a cooling of prayer, a creeping cynicism, a return to an old habit, so they can turn back quickly rather than wander far.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ongoing pull of conformity to the world
- Recognizing the early signs of spiritual drift
- The difference between being tempted and being mastered
- Vigilance as a mark of the renewed life

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you still feel the pull of the course of this world?
- What are your personal warning signs that you are drifting?
- What helps you turn back quickly when you notice the drift?

Question 3

Student Question:

Verses 4 and 5 turn on the words but God, being rich in mercy. What did God do for people who were spiritually dead, and what does Paul say moved Him to do it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The hinge of the passage is two words: but God. The grammar itself preaches. Our sentence was heading toward death and wrath, and God interrupted it. Being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, He made us alive together with Christ.

Notice the cause Paul gives. God acted because He is rich in mercy and because of His great love, not because we had improved or become deserving. The initiative, the motive, and the power are all on God's side. We contributed the deadness; He contributed the life.

The phrase made us alive together with Christ ties our new life to Christ's resurrection. Because He was raised, we who are united to Him are raised to new life. Our spiritual resurrection is a sharing in His.

Let the class linger on the contrast. The blacker the backdrop of verses 1 through 3, the brighter the diamond of verses 4 and 5. This is the heart of the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Grace as God's interruption of our death sentence
- God's mercy and love as the cause of salvation
- New life as a sharing in Christ's resurrection
- The divine initiative in salvation

Discussion Prompts

- Why are the words but God so central to the gospel?
- What does Paul say actually moved God to save us?
- How does tying our new life to Christ's resurrection give assurance?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul roots our salvation in the great love with which God loved us, not in anything attractive in us. How does it change you to know you were loved and rescued while you were still dead in sin, with nothing to offer in return?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the wonder of being loved in our deadness. We are accustomed to earning affection by being lovable. Paul says God set His love on us while we were dead in sin, with nothing to attract Him and nothing to repay Him.

This is liberating and humbling at once. Liberating, because a love that did not begin with our merit cannot be lost by our failure. Humbling, because it leaves no room for pride; we were rescued, not recruited for our promise.

Help students feel the security this gives. If God loved them at their worst, He will not abandon them now. At the same time, guide them away from presumption; the right response to such love is grateful faithfulness, not careless living, as the rest of Ephesians will make clear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being loved before we were lovable
- Security grounded in God's initiating love
- Humility as the fruit of grace
- Grateful faithfulness as the response to mercy

Discussion Prompts

- How does being loved while still dead in sin change your sense of security?
- Why does this kind of love leave no room for pride?
- How can gratitude, rather than presumption, become your response?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verse 6 Paul says God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly places. What does it mean that believers already share in Christ's resurrection and exaltation, and how is this a present reality and not only a future hope?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a breathtaking claim in verse 6: God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly places. The verbs are past tense. In Christ, the believer already shares in His resurrection and even in His exaltation. Our position is settled in Him.

This is the language of union with Christ. What is true of the Head is reckoned true of the body. Because Christ is raised and seated, those joined to Him are spoken of as already raised and seated with Him. Our truest identity is not defined by our struggles below but by our position above.

This is a present reality, not merely a future hope. While we still live and battle on earth, our life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1–3). Help the class grasp that the Christian fights from victory, not merely for it.

Guard against escapism. Being seated with Christ does not mean we float above ordinary life; it means we live ordinary life from a settled, secure standing in Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Union with Christ in His resurrection and exaltation
- The believer's settled identity and position in Christ
- A present reality, not only a future hope
- Living from victory rather than merely for it

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that you are already seated with Christ?
- How does a settled identity in Christ differ from striving to prove yourself?
- How might this truth steady you in a week of pressure or failure?

Question 6

Student Question:

If you are already seated with Christ, your truest identity is settled and secure. How would living from that settled position, rather than striving to achieve it, change the way you face this week's pressures and failures?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns position into practice. Many believers live as though their standing with God rises and falls with their performance, anxious after every failure. Paul says the believer is already seated with Christ; the standing is secure.

Living from that position changes how we face both pressure and failure. We do not work to gain acceptance; we work from acceptance already given. When we sin, we return to a place that is still ours rather than scrambling to re-earn it.

Encourage students to preach this truth to themselves. When the accusing voice says you have lost your place, the gospel answers that your place is in Christ, who is seated and cannot be unseated. From there, repentance is sweet rather than terrifying.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Working from acceptance rather than for acceptance
- Security that does not rise and fall with performance
- Returning to a secure standing after failure
- Preaching the gospel to oneself

Discussion Prompts

- How does your standing with God tend to feel after you fail?
- What does it look like to work from acceptance rather than for it?
- How can you preach your secure position in Christ to yourself this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Verse 7 says God saved us so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us. What does it mean that you are meant to be a lasting display of God's grace, and what does this reveal about God's purpose in saving you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 7 gives God's long-range purpose in saving us: so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. We are saved not only for our own sake but to be an eternal exhibit of grace.

Think of it as God displaying His kindness through redeemed sinners forever. Throughout the coming ages, the universe will look at the church and marvel, not at how good we were, but at how rich God's grace is. We are the canvas on which His kindness is painted.

This reframes the purpose of salvation away from self and toward the glory of God's grace. We exist, redeemed, to make much of Him. It also dignifies the ordinary believer, whose very life is meant to advertise the kindness of God.

Help the class see that this purpose is secure and ongoing. God's reputation for grace is bound up with finishing the work He began in us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer as an eternal display of God's grace
- Salvation aimed at the glory of God's kindness
- The dignity this gives to ordinary lives
- God's commitment to complete what He began

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that your life is meant to display God's grace?
- How does this purpose reframe why you were saved?
- How does it dignify even an ordinary, hidden life?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says we are trophies of grace, meant to put God's kindness on display. When others look at your life, what do they see displayed: your own goodness, or the kindness of God toward an undeserving sinner?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the display personal. Every Christian is showing onlookers something. The only question is what. A self-made image of personal goodness points to us; a life visibly dependent on mercy points to God.

Ask students to consider honestly what their lives advertise. A harsh, proud, or self-righteous believer obscures the very grace they have received. A humble, kind, forgiving believer becomes a window through which others glimpse the kindness of God.

Encourage a shift in motive. We do not perform to be admired; we live transformed so that God is admired. The trophy points away from itself to the One who won the victory.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living so that God's kindness, not our goodness, is seen
- How pride and harshness obscure grace
- Humility and mercy as a window to God

- Right motive: that God be admired, not us

Discussion Prompts

- When people look at your life, what do they tend to see displayed?
- How can our attitudes either reveal or obscure God's grace?
- What would it look like to be a clearer trophy of His kindness?

Question 9

Student Question:

Verses 8 and 9 say, 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. Yet verse 10 says we are created in Christ Jesus for good works. What works does Paul exclude from saving us, and how do verse 10 and the rest of the New Testament keep us from concluding that we are saved by faith alone, apart from any obedient response such as repentance, confession, and baptism?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal center of the lesson, and the teacher should give it the fullest treatment. Paul writes: 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 (vv. 8–9). Then, without pausing, verse 10: for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. The whole meaning hangs on reading these three verses together rather than stopping at verse 9.

First, affirm without flinching what Paul affirms. Salvation is by grace. It is a gift. It cannot be earned. No one will stand before God and boast that they merited heaven by their performance or their law-keeping. Any teaching that turns salvation into wages for good behavior is condemned by this text. We must preach grace as freely and as boldly as Paul does.

Second, identify precisely what works Paul excludes. In Ephesians and in Romans, the works Paul sets against grace are works of human merit and works of the law by which a person would put God in his debt and boast in himself (Romans 4:1–5; Ephesians 2:9). These cannot save. But Paul is not excluding the obedient response of faith that God commands. The very faith that saves is a faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into Him. These are not meritorious achievements that earn salvation; they are the God-appointed way the empty hand of faith receives the free gift.

Consider baptism as the clearest example. Just four chapters earlier in Paul's thinking (Romans 6:3–4), baptism is being buried with Christ and raised to walk in newness of life; in Galatians 3:27 those baptized into Christ have put on Christ; in Acts 2:38 Peter commands repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins. None of these is a work of merit; all are grace received by faith. A drowning man who takes the rope held out to him has not earned his rescue or boasted

in his strength. He has simply received what was offered. So the believer who obeys the gospel is not boasting; he is receiving the gift on God's terms.

Third, let verse 10 finish the thought. We are saved by grace through faith, and we are created in Christ Jesus for good works. Faith that truly receives grace is never alone; it goes to work (Galatians 5:6; James 2:24, a man is justified by works and not by faith alone). So the doctrine of faith only fails on two counts: it ignores the obedient response by which faith receives the gift, and it severs the saved life from the good works for which we were created. Teach grace fully, teach obedient faith clearly, and let no one leave thinking that mere mental assent, apart from a life of faithful obedience, is what saves.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Salvation by grace as a free gift that cannot be earned or boasted in
- The works Paul excludes: human merit and law-keeping that put God in our debt
- Saving faith as an obedient faith: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized
- Baptism as grace received, not merit earned (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; Acts 2:38)
- Verse 10 binding salvation to the good works for which we are created
- Why faith only misreads the passage (James 2:24; Galatians 5:6)
- Holding grace and obedience together without diminishing either

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of works does Paul exclude when he says not a result of works?
- How is obeying the gospel (believing, repenting, being baptized) different from earning salvation?
- How does verse 10 keep us from concluding that we are saved by faith alone?

Question 10

Student Question:

Verse 10 says we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Looking back over this whole passage, name one specific good work God seems to be preparing for you, and one way the move from death to life is forming you right now.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone rests on verse 10: we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. The word workmanship pictures us as God's handiwork, His craftsmanship. Salvation is not the end of the story but the beginning of a life of prepared good works.

Note the order, which guards the gospel. We are not saved by good works; we are saved for good works. Grace comes first and produces the works, not the reverse. But the works genuinely follow. A faith that produces no walk is not the living faith Paul describes.

Press students to name one specific good work God seems to be preparing for them, perhaps a reconciliation, an act of service, a courageous obedience. God has prepared these beforehand; our task is to walk in them as they come.

Close by connecting the whole passage to transformation. The move from death to life is not merely a past event but an ongoing reality forming the believer day by day. Ask each person to name one way that resurrection is showing itself in them now.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saved for good works, not by them
- Good works as the fruit and evidence of living faith
- God's prepared path of obedience for each believer
- The move from death to life as ongoing transformation

Discussion Prompts

- What good work does God seem to be preparing for you right now?
- How does the order (saved for works, not by them) protect the gospel?
- Where do you see the move from death to life still at work in you?