

Lent 4B 14 March 2021
Ephesians 2:1-10
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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... 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. Let's pray:

This is the 2017 St Peter's Directory. On a functional level, it contains names, addresses, phone numbers, and a prayer list. However, on the awesome level, it contains the miracle of life.

Paul isn't just referring to death as we usually understand it, but to being dead 'in our transgressions' – dead in our sin, dead to God. Alienation from God. The corruption of the whole unrenewed human nature. Death brought about by original sin.

I know it's not popular, but we need to understand the effect of sin on our daily lives.

Imagine this scene: Two brothers arrive home from footy training, ravenous, and ready to eat their parents out of house and home. Their mother tells them not to fill their bellies because they'll spoil their tea. If they must eat, they can have one piece of fruit each. True to form, the boys wait until their mother is distracted and tuck into a family block of chocolate and a packet of corn chips they've discovered on the kitchen bench. Later, during the evening meal, the mother observes her sons picking disinterestedly at their food. She also notices that the goodies she'd bought earlier that day were missing. When asked if they can shed any light on this mystery, the boys point at each other and protest, "He made me do it." Realising what the pair have done, the mother lowers her head disapprovingly. To add insult to injury, she explains that the chocolate and corn chips were intended as a treat to enjoy with their

father while watching Friday night footy, and can they imagine his disappointment. Sin spoils and destroys.

Sin has entirely corrupted humanity. It leaves people alienated from the life of God, paralysed, and by nature, disobedient “children of wrath.” It’s that yucky stuff that we don’t like, but need to hear. The problem with ignoring sin is that it limits the opportunities we have to experience the great throbbing heart of God, bursting with love and compassion for us.

You see, within every person there remains a dim awareness; a hunger for God. Romans 2:15 says, ‘They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts . . .’ All people instinctively know that things aren’t as they should be. We know that something is missing. Through God’s grace, we have a loving memory of him. We have a divine nostalgia that knows there’s something so much better, yet out of reach by our own efforts. The early church father St Augustine once wrote, ‘You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you’ (Augustine of Hippo 354-430, *Confessions*). So has God abandoned us to our own devices? Does he tease us with this spiritual wistfulness?

No friends. God hasn’t abandoned us. God’s memory is infallible and he has everything in full view. Although the image of God in us is corrupted and broken, we are still his creatures, fallen, but not forgotten. As St Paul tells us, ‘God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). Not only that, Paul goes further in his letter to the Ephesians and says that while we were dead in our disobedience, God came down from heaven and brought us back to life with Christ!

For most of us, this happened in our baptism. A good analogy is to think of people swimming in rough surf at a popular beach. Lifesavers will often drag people lifeless from the surf and save them from near drowning by resuscitating them. The person “saved” has contributed nothing toward their good fortune. In the same way, we have made no contribution to our salvation. God’s mercy has saved us through the waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit has given us new birth and new life. Pure gift!

God does this freely and with great richness. Billionaires are rich, but they can’t buy peace. Artists are rich in creativity and produce wonderful works of art, yet they can’t match the wonder of a rainbow. Learned people are rich in knowledge and can teach us much about God, but they can’t open our hearts.

And surgeons are richly gifted with lifesaving skills, but can't grant eternal life. Yet, God shares all of these things generously with us out of his great love for us, for the sake of Jesus.

But wait, there's more! Not only has God made us alive with Christ, he has also raised us up and seated us with Christ in heaven for all eternity. This allows us to enjoy our lives here on earth with a sort of relaxed detachment. We can be confident that the difficulties we endure are only a passing phase. We can enjoy our days here in both good times and bad, because it's not the only life we have.

But why were we given new life, new freedom, and the status of heavenly citizens?... So that God might reveal to us even more of his super-abundant love, richness, and kindness toward us. Not only does God bless us with all good and necessary things for life now, but he will keep rolling out immeasurable riches for us in heaven that we can't even begin to imagine. We can only be awestruck at a life without tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain (Revelation 21:4).

Who among us can fathom the magnificence of a new Jerusalem; a city made of pure gold? To what could we compare its surrounding walls made of jasper with foundations adorned with jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and amethyst? Each gate a single pearl with streets of pure gold (Revelation 21:18-21). "In Christ" the palace of salvation has opened its gates to all who believe. All this, out of God's unlimited grace and benevolence.

Grace is God's gift to us; like a birthday present. It's freely given and not earned by anything that we have done or can do. We can't make deals with God. We can't pay him back with gratitude. We certainly can't boast about it because we haven't earned it. It's God's freely given, undeserved, unmerited action and favour toward us, in Christ. God has established peace with us who were once "children of wrath" but are now, "objects of his love."

Even so, this doesn't make us disinterested spectators merely waiting to pass through the mortal stage of our lives. Paul tells us that there's good work to be done and I'll explain this by way of another illustration: Inside this box is a gift from God. Inscribed on the label are these words: "Handle with extreme care and kindness. Inside, you'll find my finest work. Nothing in all of my creative genius can surpass this. This is my crowning achievement, the jewel

that completes the wonder of my creation. Your human words are inadequate to describe this because of the intensity of my love for my Son.”

What could possibly be so wonderful, beyond human words even to express? (Open the box to reveal a mirror). It's you! *You* are the pinnacle of God's creative brilliance and you are loved beyond measure for the sake of Jesus Christ! *You* are God's good work prepared beforehand by him to be showpieces to all future generations, of his grace. *You* have been chosen to continue shining the light of Christ's life into this world.

Saints, the inescapable fact is that as human beings, we were born into sin, enslaved by it, helpless and lifeless. But that old way of being has passed away. We're now free to live the new life, bearing Jesus' fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). We've entered the sphere of God's own activity, and although our imperfections frustrate us in this life, he who began a good work in us will complete it in the next (Philippians 1:6).

- By grace [God's] eyes beheld [your] unformed substance. In [His] book were written all the days that were formed for [you], when none of them as yet existed (Psalm 139:16).
- By grace your Redeemer, formed you in the womb (Isaiah 44:24).
- By grace God sent His Spirit of truth to guide you into all the truth (John 16:13).
- By grace, if [your] father and mother forsake [you], the Lord will take [you] up (Psalm 27:10).
- By grace, God says, “I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you” (Isaiah 43:1,4).
- By grace, God, because of **his great love for us**, raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6).
- By grace you have been [not will be], have been saved (Ephesians 2:8; [are saved] Hebrews 10:39).

Once we were dead, but now we have been made alive together with Christ to praise the glory of our Heavenly Father's grace. Amen.

The peace and grace of God which passes all human understanding, keep us alive together with Christ. Amen.