



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for May 10, 2009
Released on, May 7, 2009

"New Life in Christ"

Lesson Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

Background Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-22

Devotional Reading: Psalm 86:1-13

Ephesians 2:1-10

1 And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;

2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:

3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us,

5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)

6 And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:

7 That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace, in his kindness toward us, through Christ Jesus.

8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Today's Aim

Facts: to describe our life without Jesus and what Christ has done for us.

Principle: to show that new life comes only through the gift of our Lord Jesus on the cross.

Application: to show that all who turn unto Jesus and receive His gift of salvation can experience new life.

Introduction

"I don't Need Your Charity"

I was brought up in a lower-middle class, blue-collar neighborhood where most people worked in trades or heavy industry. My grandfather was a construction worker who had grown up on a farm and left school after the eighth grade; he retired as vice president of a major company through sheer hard work and determination. My father worked two jobs, serving as a firefighter and running his own remodeling business on off days.

Many times I saw families in my neighborhood suffer because the parents refused to accept aid from anyone. Through this upbringing, I learned to take pride in hard work and, especially, to avoid taking charity or welfare. This attitude in many ways reflects the American definition of success: taking care of yourself and never admitting that you need help.

This same spirit of self-sufficiency and independence can be found in American religion. Many American Christians feel very little responsibility for fellow believers. They may also often feel (at least subconsciously) that they must prove their worth to God by doing good deeds. The apostle Paul characterized his own religious life similarly in Philippians 3:4–6, noting that he once took great pride in his Jewish heritage, membership in the sect of the Pharisees, and strict obedience to the Old Testament. Indeed, he asserted that he was “blameless” in keeping the Law of Moses.

But Paul’s sudden and dramatic conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19) started him down a path of thinking differently. That new thinking eventually was written down in a series of letters. A key issue in those letters is Paul’s conclusion that we cannot earn our salvation.

All people, even the most righteous, are saved only by God’s grace. That means that He does what we cannot do so that we may be acceptable to Him. In our passage for today, Paul makes this point by noting that God did not save us when we were good people, but rather when we were sinners. Good works become possible only because of what He did for us. Recognizing this fact, we should respond to His mercy through loyal service.

Lesson Background

Ephesus was one of the best known cities in the ancient world. Its fame came not only from its size and commercial importance, but also and particularly from Ephesian religious culture. One of the largest temple complexes of the day—in fact, one of the so-called “seven wonders of the ancient world”—was located there. It was dedicated to Artemis, the goddess of the wilderness and fertility. Ephesus was also a world center of occult practices and black arts (compare Acts 19:19).

When Paul first arrived in Ephesus in about AD 54, he spent three months teaching in local synagogues, but some became hardened, and believed not. Eventually, Paul left, and established a school in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8,9). The Ephesian church eventually was threatened by pressures from local trade unions. They feared a loss of profit, since Paul’s preaching against idolatry was so effective that it jeopardized sales of articles that bore the image of Artemis (Acts 19:23–27).

Thus the various elements of Ephesian culture presented special challenges and opportunities to the apostle Paul when he visited the city on his third missionary journey. In view of their deeply pagan background, Paul wanted the Ephesian Christians to understand two points clearly: (1) God had completely forgiven the sins of their previous lifestyle, and (2) God expected them to produce good works as expressions of redemption. Our passage for today covers both topics.

Our Previous Condition (Ephesians 2:1-3)

1. What connection exists between Christ’s resurrection and the new spiritual life we have in Him? (v. 1)

Paul paints a glorious picture of the spiritual blessings provided by the Triune God in Ephesians 1. Paul offered a prayer for his readers’ spiritual enlightenment (vs. 15–23). He prayed that they might understand the hope that accompanied their calling, the richness of their inheritance, and the greatness of God’s power manifested to

believers. The prime example of this power is the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ.

Paul opens this section of Ephesians by equating life without Christ with spiritual death. This means that our conversion is a kind of resurrection. *Dead* probably refers here both to our alienation from God and to the actual physical consequences of our sin. This concept is developed more fully in Romans 6, where Paul stresses that “the wages of sin is death” (6:23; see also Colossians 2:13).

Yet the Christian has been *quicken*ed, meaning “made alive.” While Christians expect to live eternally in Heaven after death, in a very real sense we are already experiencing eternal life through our relationship with God in this world right now.

2. In what ways were we walking “according to the course of this world” (v. 2)?

Paul has just described the Ephesians as having been dead in their sins. In verses 2, 3 he clarifies exactly what he means by offering a concise summary of their former, pagan lifestyle. The word *walk* can be used as a figure of speech for one’s lifestyle. With this figure Paul suggests that nonbelievers are following the lead of two forces that continually steer them away from God.

First, they follow *the course of this world*. While the biblical authors insist that God created the earth and everything in it, they also characterize the world as evil, materialistic, and hostile to Him (see John 1:10; Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15). The world is evil because the entire human social system is focused on power, personal pleasure, and success at the expense of others. This is a self-centered, as opposed to God-centered, system.

Second, and more specifically, worldly people are driven along by *the prince of the power of the air*. This unusual title obviously refers to the devil, but scholars are divided on why Paul would refer to Satan as ruler of the air.

The most likely explanation is that Paul is referring to the pagan religious systems that the Ephesians formerly accepted. Today we generally think of God living above the earth while demons are trapped in Hell down below. But most ancient people believe that the earth is at the bottom of a cosmic ladder, with evil spirits and minor deities just above us and the more powerful gods on a higher plane yet. By calling Satan *prince of the air*, Paul thus acknowledges his influence, but also stresses that his authority is far below that of the true God, who dwells in the highest Heaven.

In any case, Paul is less concerned with Satan’s domain than with his impact on people’s lives. While many nonbelievers would not attribute their actions to any supernatural influence, Paul makes clear that their lives are heavily influenced by the devil. There are no innocent bystanders: one is either alive in faith or dead in sin, either a servant of God or a slave of the devil.

3. In what ways did our flesh control us before coming to Christ (v. 3)?

As in chapter 1, the word *we* probably refers to Jewish Christians such as Paul himself. It takes little effort to prove that pagans live lives *fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind*. But Paul everywhere emphasizes that even “good” Jews are *children of wrath* before coming to Christ.

Of course, Jews believe in and worship the true God, not idols and demons. But this fact does not stop them from breaking God’s law and pursuing self-gratification. The phrase *lusts of our flesh* refers to things that we do because they feel good to our bodies, even though we know that God disapproves of them: getting drunk, engaging in sexual immorality, etc.

Paul also admits that he too was once enslaved to *the desires* of the *mind*, a likely reference to the more intellectual sins: covetousness, pride, etc. Those who do such

things show that they are alienated from God and deserving of punishment. (Remember that the word *conversation* in the *King James Version* means "way of living.")

4. Which sins cause you the most trouble: those of the flesh or those of the mind? How have you grown spiritually in being able to triumph over these trouble spots?

Sin may be classified in various ways. Paul's two-sphere classification is foundational. Sins of the flesh are more obvious to ourselves and outsiders; these kinds of sins therefore are potentially easier for us to take action against. Sins of the mind do not always result in obvious visible behaviors. The mind is a place where others cannot see into (but God can). It is a place about which we often delude ourselves.

The two often interact, as sin in one area leads to sin in the other. For example, lustful thoughts (sin of the mind) can lead to adultery (sin of the flesh). Working the other way around, what a person gains through theft (sin of the flesh) can lead to even greater covetousness (sin of the mind). If we focus on triumphing over the sins of the mind first, then the sins of the flesh have the potential of disappearing entirely.

Our Present Condition (Ephesians 2:4-7)

5. What have God's mercy and love done for sinners? (vs. 4,5)

The story that begins in verses 2, 3 could have ended with the fire and brimstone of eternal damnation. Every person of every religious background is guilty of *sins* of the body and the mind. A righteous God is justified in repaying such rebelliousness with eternal death.

Genesis 7 ends with a worldwide flood that nearly wipes out the human race. But this time things work out differently: God decides to forgive us. Paul can offer only two explanations for this remarkable twist in the plot, and neither of them has anything to do with our efforts. First, God is *rich in mercy*, a phrase that stresses His willingness to forego the punishment we deserve. Second, God's mercy is driven by the simple fact that He loves us, even when we do not love Him.

Both the reason for and the expression of God's *love* are indicated in the phrase *with Christ*. Christ's death on the cross secures our salvation; His resurrection from the tomb also brings our spirits to life. Thus for the first time people are able to come to God fully forgiven after years of seeking fulfillment in false religions and pleasures of the flesh. It almost goes without saying by this point in Paul's argument that our salvation is the result of God's *grace*, not our own merit.

6. What present position do we have in God's sight? (v. 6)

At the end of chapter 1, Paul speaks of Christ's ascension to Heaven and exaltation after His resurrection. There He sat down at God's right hand to rule the universe (Ephesians 1:20-23; see Philippians 2:8-11). Now Paul says that Christ not only redeemed us and brought us back to life, He also raised us together so that we may share in His glorious reign.

Notably, these words refer not only to our eternal reward in Heaven, but also to our status as believers now, at the present time. Not only has God forgiven us, He has also raised us up with and through His Son. See also Colossians 2:12 for other features associated with being "raised."

We were seated with Christ in the heavenliness the moment we received Him by faith. This means we no longer have to be dominated by Satan and his demons. Since we are in Christ, we are far above Satan and his demons' authority. We can claim this spiritual authority by faith.

7. What will God's grace do for us in the future? (v. 7)

Since we are raised up with and through Christ Jesus, "in the ages to come" we will enter the full experience of the position we enjoy now in God's sight. The redemption and forgiveness we already have are according to the riches of His grace (cf. 1:7). But one day He will come and show us the exceeding riches of His grace, and His kindness towards us. Jesus will be displayed in infinite new ways.

Let us then pause to wonder at the glorious position God has given us in His Son. From being objects of His wrath, we have become objects of His mercy and love. From spiritual death, we have been raised to spiritual life. From satanic bondage in the world, we have passed to exaltation with Christ in the heavenlies. And from certain doom, we have been delivered to safety and receive the surpassing riches of God's grace.

Further, God has done all this not only for our own benefit, but also and primarily so that He can demonstrate His graciousness to all creation. The fact of our salvation reveals His nature as a loving and merciful God.

The Means of Transformation (Ephesians 2:8-10)

8. How is even our faith part of the Gift of God? (v. 8)

Up to this point in the chapter, Paul has used fairly grandiose language to describe God's love and our salvation. The Ephesians have lived out the ultimate "rags to riches" story, going from ignorant slaves to exalted children of God. But lest this lead to spiritual arrogance, Paul proceeds to stress two critical points.

First, our salvation is a product of God's *grace*, not of anything we have done or could do. It is, in fact, categorically impossible for any person to be saved by works (see v. 9, next). Second, salvation, being a gift, is not something we can take for granted. The fact that God did all the work to bring us back to life doesn't mean that we can kick back and relax. Quite the opposite! Verse 10 (below) stresses that we are saved for the purpose of works for Christ.

The phrase *through faith* indicates the premier means by which we are saved, the way that God's grace comes to us. (The parallel passage Colossians 2:12 adds the important dimension of baptism.) Jesus' death on the cross was a public act, a fact of history. But, sadly, not everyone receives forgiveness through His sacrifice. God's grace becomes relevant to us as we believe in Him. This means believing not only that God exists, as Paul believed when he was still a Jewish sinner (v. 3), but also believing to the point that we have faith in Christ as our only way of salvation. Faith is not a meritorious act, but the indispensable channel through which man receives God's free gift. The gift to which Paul refers is the forgiveness that we enjoy once faith allows us to receive God's grace.

9. Why can't just being a good person, who does good things for people get us into heaven? (v. 9)

This verse completes and underscores the thought of verse 8. We do not receive grace because we have done good *works* (Romans 3:28; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5). If salvation could come by works, then people could *boast* about their salvation. Of course, God would not be impressed by any such boasting (1 Corinthians 1:29).

If we were to boast of any part of our salvation, it would cease to accomplish what God would intended—to bring praise to the glory of His grace (cf. Eph. 1:6, 12; 2:7). Heaven would be a place of ceaseless boasting. God worked out His salvation so that this would never happen.

Humility is important. We may be tempted to criticize the lifestyles of worldly friends and relatives, but let us not forget that we did nothing to merit God's favor ourselves. A proper understanding of who we were and what God has done should

instead make us feel deep appreciation to Him and a deep sorrow for those who are lost.

10. Why do good works then? (v. 10)

Once we are saved, *good works* are not optional. Verse 10 tells us that “we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works.” This further shows us that our works cannot be a part of our salvation. We are saved to do good works. Works cannot save us. Neither do we need to try to earn our salvation after we receive Christ. “Salvation is a gift from God. Service is our gift to God.” Another way of saying it is: Works never produce salvation, but salvation always produces good works. There is nothing we can do to earn salvation. Jesus paid the price for mankind.

Now Paul extends that thought to stress that God also *ordained* long ago that we are to live in a way that reflects our status as His children.

11. What feelings are appropriate and inappropriate for accompanying our good works? How have you grown spiritually in this regard?

The Holy Spirit not only convicts us concerning sin, but also concerning righteousness (John 16:8). Conviction is an emotional response (compare Acts 2:37), thus we should not expect our good works to be accompanied by no feelings whatsoever. The good deeds of the first-century believers were accompanied by “gladness” (Acts 2:44–46) and “joy” (2 Corinthians 8:2).

Then as now, there was/is to be no feeling of “now this person owes me one.” Also, failing to do what we know we ought to do should bring us feelings of guilt (compare James 4:17).

Conclusion

Christians may be plagued with doubts about their salvation. “Trying hard, never sure” is the way such self-doubt has been described. When we reflect on our past lives and our ongoing sinfulness, we don’t seem to be making the grade. Indeed, if God evaluated our performance in the same way that our employers do, we might have been cut a long time ago.

This approach to faith, which reflects the spirit and ethic of a Western marketplace, typically generates two responses, which often work together in something of a vicious cycle. First, we may try to do good deeds to prove that we are worthy of God’s love and mercy; second, when we inevitably fail to be perfect, we feel guilty and ashamed. These feelings of guilt will lead us either to try even harder or to give up. This cycle of effort/failure/guilt leads to depression and burnout. It never leads to genuine biblical faith.

The apostle Paul had lived in a cycle something like this before becoming a Christian. Perhaps for this reason he stressed God’s grace again and again. The work necessary for us to become members in God’s family has been done on the cross; it has nothing to do with anything we have done or could do. Of course, God expects us to do what is right, but we do this as an expression of our salvation, not as merit points toward it.

So whenever we begin to feel guilty, insecure, or burned out, we need to pause and ask why. Are we focusing on our own (in)abilities? If so, the cure is to recall that God has called us to Him through His Son, not through our own efforts. The cross puts an end to self-doubt.

Prayer

Father, we understand that the Bible says You love us. Help us to know this love in our hearts. Please take away our feelings of guilt so that we can focus entirely on

Your infinite grace.

Give us a real desire to serve You, not just because we have to but because we know that You have made us for this reason. Give us also compassion toward those who do not know You and opportunities to help them learn of the wonderful grace we have received. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Thought to Remember

Meditate on God's grace.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

In our lesson next week we will see how we can partake of the promises of God through His revelation of Jesus Christ to us.

Have a blessed Mother's Day!

Lesson Summarized By

Montario Fletcher

Jesus Is All Ministries

www.jesusisall.com

WORKS CITED

Summary and commentary derived from Standard Lesson Commentary Copyright© 2009 by permission of Standard Publishing.

Reprinted by permission of The Incorporated Trustees of the Gospel Worker Society, Union Gospel Press, P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101. (Web site: <http://www.uniongospelpress.com/>)

The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books.