

**illus:** at the age of 33, Paul Azinger was at the top of his game. That year he won three tournaments on the PGA tour, including his first major, the PGA Championship. Just before the Championship, Paul began to experience significant pain in his shoulder. His doctor suggesting running a battery of tests, but Paul was playing such good golf that he put it off until the end of the year.

Included in the battery of tests was a biopsy, and when the results came back, it wasn't good news—non-Hodgkin's lymphoma had been found in Paul's shoulder. He had expected to hear that he had a stress fracture or an infection of some kind but he wasn't prepared to hear the word "cancer".

Paul recalls being in an x-ray room, lying on an ice cold table. He writes, "As I lay there while the technician adjusted the machines, a genuine feeling of fear came upon me—I could die from cancer. But then another reality hit me even harder—I'm going to die eventually anyway. Whether from cancer or something else, I'm definitely going to die. It's just a question of when."

Just then a thought came to mind—something that he had heard his bible study leader say before: "[Paul], we're not in the land of the living going to the land of the dying. We're in the land of the dying, trying to get to the land of the living."

Paul writes, "My major championship, my ten victories before that, everything I had accomplished in golf became meaningless to me. All I wanted to do was live."<sup>1</sup>

Thousands of years ago, Job posed a question that has been repeated many times, by many people, throughout history: "*Can the dead live again?*" This one of life's most important questions because life is the most precious gift.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he talks about the interplay between God and humanity, life and death. And Paul's conclusion on the matter is that God has acted through Christ so that the dead can live again. Ephesians 2:1-10 is one of the Bible's most concise descriptions of humanity's predicament and God's glorious plan of rescue.

At this time, I'd like to invite you to turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 2:1-10; if you are using the Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 947. **Read.**

*"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 flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving 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*

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Azinger, <http://www.linksplayers.com/articles/paul-azinger>.

*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 is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—* **9** *not by works, so that no one can boast.* **10** *For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

I’m going to divide our text into three sections this morning, and provide a summary statement for each section. The three sections are vs. 1-3, vs. 4-7, and vs. 8-10. Let’s look at the first.

### **1. Vs. 1-3: You were dead.**

**illus:** perhaps you’ve heard the story of a man, travelling by donkey, down a wooded path; at one point he came upon a small fuzzy object lying on the path. He dismounted to take a look and found a sparrow, lying on its back, with its scrawny legs pointed to the sky. At first he thought the bird was dead, but upon closer investigation, he saw that the sparrow was very much alive.

The man asked the sparrow, “*Are you alright?*” To which the sparrow responded, “*Yes.*” The man then asked, “*What are you doing lying on your back with your legs pointed towards the sky?*” The sparrow replied, “*I heard that the sky will fall and I’m holding up my legs to catch it.*” The man responded, “*Do you really think that you can hold*

*up the sky with those two scrawny legs?* The sparrow replied, in a very solemn tone, “*One must do the best they can.*”

Humanity’s problem mirrors that of the sparrow. Paul offers God’s assessment of humanity— apart from Christ, we are dead in our transgressions and sins. When Paul says that we are “dead,” what he means is that we are cut off from God, unable to rescue ourselves, and even unable—on our own—to turn to God for rescue.

While the words “transgressions” and “sins” have slightly different meanings, taken together they indicate that humanity has chosen to shut the door on God. One author writes, “Sin is the act of choosing our own way and leaving God out of the picture”.<sup>2</sup> Another author writes, “We live in a world where human beings, left to themselves, not only choose the wrong direction, but remain cheerfully confident that it is in fact the right one.”<sup>3</sup>

In vs. 3, Paul speaks about “*gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.*” This is a picture of humanity turned in on itself. Verses 2 and 3 remind us that there are both internal and external forces that compel us to move in the wrong direction, that is to say, away from God.

The truth of the matter is, we do not have life in ourselves. We have been created by God and for God—shutting the door on God catches up with all of us eventually. To be separated from God spiritually, is to be cut off from the ultimate source of life—every movement away

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<sup>2</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary*, 109.

<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 19.

from Him is a movement towards death. “*By nature,*” Paul says, we are “*deserving of wrath.*” In the end, those who choose life apart from God will be granted the consequence of their choice—they will receive the very thing they’ve asked for, separation from God and all that is good.

I want to pause here and let the reality of these words sink in. And more, I want to invite you to explore the questions that arise in light of these words. Perhaps you are asking, “*is the situation really as dire as the Bible portrays?*” Or, “*how can a loving God punish humanity?*”

The biggest challenge to understanding this passage is the Western worldview that we have been thoroughly baptized into. Western culture has removed the notion of God from its conscience, and with the removal of God, the notion of a moral centre has disappeared. In the absence of God, the notion of “right” and “wrong” has no foundation—they are simply a matter of personal conviction.

So how do we talk about the problem of sin in a culture that no longer believe in the notion? Most people I know want a life without boundaries, and choices without consequences. While we can pursue a life without boundaries, none of us, whether we believe in sin or not, can outrun the consequences of our choices.

As for whether punishment can coexist with a loving God, it’s important to keep in mind that love is not the opposite of punishment. Every parent knows this to be true. A God who feels nothing, and does nothing, in the face of wrong doing, suffering, and injustice is a God who does not care and cannot love.

If vs. 1-3 describe the human condition apart from Christ, then vs. 4-7 describe God’s movement towards us through Jesus Christ. Though we were dead...

## 2. Vs. 4-7: *But God made us alive.*

**illus:** There was a guy in our youth group—his name was Kevin—and he could fall asleep almost anywhere; when he did, it was nearly impossible to wake him. We discovered it by accident at a youth retreat one year, and from that time on we would have fun with Kevin whenever he fell asleep. We could shout at him, shake him, even put a wet finger in his ear, but Kevin would sleep on.

One March our group boarded a bus bound for Youth Conference at Canadian Bible College in Regina. We drove the through night and in the wee hours of the morning we all fell asleep. At one point the bus came to a stop outside a McDonald’s; everyone woke up and was preparing to get off the bus but Kevin was still fast asleep. And that’s when a few of the girls got an idea.

They pulled out their mascara, their eyeliner, their lipstick, lip gloss, and rouge; they went to work on Kevin to see if he could sleep through a makeover. He could, and he did; when they had finished, he was still sleeping. We shook him and shouted to rouse him from his sleep; he finally awoke and went into the McDonald’s with us. No one told him that his face had been painted.

It wasn’t until Kevin was standing at the counter, ordering his food, that he noticed us smiling and saw his reflection in a mirror. His eyes bugged out, his mouth hung open, and without saying a word, he ran to the bathroom to scrub his face clean. He came back a few minutes

later and had a good laugh with all of us. Kevin's ability to sleep was legendary.

The point I am trying to make is this: no matter how soundly a person sleeps, with effort they can be roused, but a person who is dead cannot be roused—they need to be raised. Paul doesn't say that humanity was sleeping and needed to be roused, he says humanity is dead in their sins—devoid of spiritual life and unable to turn to God for rescue. We are helpless unless God acts.

Listen once more to Paul's words, "*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.*"

Salvation is the outflow of God's love. Ephesians 1:4-5 tells us that the Father chose us, in love, to be adopted as sons and daughters. Here in Ephesians 2:4, Paul talks about the *great love* of the Father that resulted in the saving work of Jesus. Ephesians 3:17-19 tells us that Jesus' love for us is wider, longer, higher, and deeper than we could ever imagine. In Ephesians 5:1, Paul invites us to see ourselves as the Father does—as dearly loved children. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul reminds us that Jesus loved the church so much that He laid down His life for her sake. **We get life because He loves.**

But Paul isn't done; he stacks adjective upon adjective, describing just how wonderful God is. The One who loves is rich in mercy, He delights to show kindness, the riches of His grace are beyond

compare. God's love for us isn't sentimental, it's costly and action-oriented; He moved towards us because we couldn't move towards Him.

Look again at verse 5. When Paul says that we have been "*made alive with Christ*," he is retelling the gospel story. Jesus stepped into our world, He bore our sin, He embraced death, and three days later was raised to life. Job asked, "*Can the dead live again?*" Jesus offers a resounding "**Yes!**"

Paul is talking about the mystery of being united to Jesus. In the incarnation, something epic happened—divinity and humanity was united in the person of Jesus. Jesus became the archetypal human being, our champion if you like, the One to whom all humanity was bound.

And so, while it is true to say that Jesus died on the cross and was raised to life for our sake, it is more biblically accurate to say that we died with Jesus and were raised with Jesus. We live because we are united to the One who lives forever; we are raised because we are united to the One who was raised from death to life.

Paul goes on. Not only was Jesus raised from death, He was raised to the place of honour and authority—seated in the heavenly realms at the Father's side. In Christ, we too have been raised. He has been vindicated and exalted; we too have been vindicated and exalted. All that belongs to Jesus has become ours.

And as we are about to discover, the gift we have been given leaves no room for boasting. Instead, both now and forever, our lives are on display as the masterpiece of God's love, mercy, and kindness.

Let's now turn to the final section of our text, vs. 8-10. We were dead, but God made us alive with Christ...

**3. Vs. 8-10: *By grace you have been saved.***

*“8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.”*

**illus:** The story is told of a conversation between an atheist and a Christian. The atheist said to the Christian, *“If there really is a God, may He prove Himself by striking me dead right now.”* Nothing happened. The atheist smugly announced, *“You see, there is no God.”* The Christian replied, *“All you’ve proved is that He is a gracious God.”*

Grace is the dazzling centerpiece of salvation. There is no room for boasting of any kind because salvation is entirely God's work. We had shut the door on God and gone our own way. While we were dead in our sins and utterly helpless to turn to the Father, He moved towards us. The Father sent the Son, and Jesus died in our place, for our sake, not because we were worthy but because of His great love.

One theologian suggests that whenever we look to the cross, we are stepping into the mystery of a love that did not have to be, but was and is.<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:9-10 says, *“9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* There

is no “should” or “must” in grace, there is only overwhelming generosity.

But in spite of this generosity, people continue to reject God's invitation to life—some, because they think they can get to God on their own merit, and others, because they think they are beyond the reach of grace. Both rejections stem from pride. One says, *“I’m too good for grace, I don’t need God.”* The other says, *“I’m too far gone for grace—God’s gift is too small.”*

Grace is a difficult concept to wrap our minds around because it runs counter to our culture—all of life seems to operate on the principle of earnings and rewards.

**illus:** When you receive a paycheque from your employer, do you go to them on blended knee and thank them for this “underserved gift?” No! You expect the paycheque—you worked hard for it, you earned it. And the harder you work, the more you expect to receive.

In the world of professional sports, the faster you run, the harder you throw, the more goals, baskets, or touchdowns you score lead to more money and prestige. Athletes are compensated according to their performance. The same is true in the business world.

I'm told that at one point in the Ford Motor Company, employees were graded on a scale of 1 to 27. One's worked in low level admin roles, while the CEO occupied the 27th grade. If you reached grade 9, you received your very own parking spot. Grade 13 got you an

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<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Neuhaus, *Death On A Friday Afternoon*, 8.

office with a window. Grade 16 earned you an office with a private bathroom.

Life as we know it is almost entirely based upon our performance. But when it comes to spiritual realities, God in His mercy, has created a system in which we get what we haven't earned, where Jesus' performance is what matters. We were separated from God and unable to earn anything—it is by grace we have been saved.

If it's by God's grace that we are saved, then faith is the means by which we receive God's gracious gift of life.

And what is this faith? While there is an intellectual aspect to faith, faith is a relational word. By faith we take God at His word; we stake our lives upon Him. We put our trust in His mercy. We trust that His love is for us, that it is greater than all of our sin. We look to Him to give us what we could never earn.

By faith we participate in Christ's death and resurrection, by faith we trust that what is true of Jesus has become true of us—we have been raised from death to life, we have been raised to the Father's side. One author writes, "Faith has an *adhesive* quality to it; it binds the believer to the One who is believed."<sup>5</sup>

This morning I want to invite you to respond to God's offer of grace. For those of you who have already staked your life upon Jesus, receive today a fresh measure of His grace. Though your sins are as scarlet, He has washed you as white as snow. He is for you, not against you; nothing can separate you from His love. His forgiveness,

His strength, His wisdom and direction, all this and more is yours because of Christ. Receive Him, receive His blessings today.

For those of you who have not yet responded to God's offer of life, make today the day. Though we are dead in our sins, separate from God and unable to work our way towards Him, through Christ, we can be made alive.

When Jesus died on the cross, He carried your pain, your disappointments, and your sin. He died and was raised to life so that you might be raised with Him. He stands even now, with open arms, inviting you to receive His forgiveness—there is nothing that He cannot forgive today. The only barrier that can keep you from God is a refusal to turn to Him.

When you admit that you need God's rescue, that Jesus died in your place, and put your trust in Him, something happens immediately. You are raised from death to life. You are adopted into God's family. You are filled with His powerful presence. Your feet are set on a new path that leads to life, both now, and forever.

Will you turn to Him today?

**Pray**

**Worship**

**Benediction**

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<sup>5</sup> Snodgrass, 105.