

A Revolutionary Concept Ephesians 2:1-10

We began to look at Paul's letter to the Ephesians last week by looking at the first half of chapter 1. The people Paul was writing to were primarily Gentiles in the ancient city of Ephesus which was known for its temple to Artemis – one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. For the Ephesians, Artemis was a big deal – she was their pride and joy and their source of economic prosperity. Artemis was the goddess of fertility and their lifestyles, beliefs, and worship revolved around her. So they had a pagan, immoral lifestyle with no Christian influence at all until Paul came to them and spent 2 years there teaching and establishing a church. Eventually he had to move on and about a year after he left he was arrested and put in prison for 5 years and it was from there that he wrote this letter.

He was writing to a church of new believers who were down-hearted because of his imprisonment and undoubtedly under spiritual attack by demonic powers in that city that were trying to discourage them. So to open the letter, Paul encouraged them by writing about all the blessings that God had for them. And because of those blessings, Paul writes in the second half of chapter 1 that when he prayed for them he asked that God would open the eyes of their hearts so that they would come to know those blessings in greater fullness – that they would know the hope to which he had called them, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and the immeasurable greatness of his power toward them who believed.

This morning we are going to pick up in chapter 2 where Paul writes of a revolutionary new concept in religion – a concept that we may think of as normal today because we're familiar with it, but would have been very abnormal when Paul first came to Ephesus. It would have blown their minds and now Paul was teaching it to them again through this letter. But even though this concept may be familiar to us today; it's a great struggle for us to actually believe deep in our hearts and experience the freedom and joy that it gives.

I don't think I really understood or experienced it until about 10 years ago. I knew about it and believed it was true, but didn't understand or experience it. God brought me to that place over the course of about 18 months of what I would have then considered spiritual failure. Prior to that time life was pretty steady and peaceful, Amy and I had our first baby and though Sophia changed our lives forever, she didn't drastically disrupt our lifestyles. But then Caleb was born and all of a sudden it was no longer 2 on 1; it was 2 on 2 – two kids and two parents and that made a huge difference. Life would never be the same. The time and

attention we had to give to our kids became all-encompassing and it took me a long time to adjust – especially when it came to my efforts in seeking to grow in my relationship with God.

Prior to Caleb's birth I remember being able to spend around 30 minutes or more every morning in Bible study and prayer and actually stay awake during it. After he was born that time disappeared because the kids were up and when I did have time I was so tired I'd fall asleep. So for about 18 months I struggled to have a consistent devotional time with God and for me that was very troubling. I felt like a failure. I felt like I was far away from God. I felt like God was very disappointed with me. I felt that way because I didn't truly understand or experience the concept that Paul writes about in our verses for this morning. And in talking with many of you over the years I know that most of us struggle in this same area.

For one reason or another we feel like God is disappointed with us – like we don't measure up. And the only way we will measure up is if we do certain things to make God happy. So we live in bondage to guilt and the emotional roller coaster of spiritual successes and failures, feeling like we fall in and out of God's favor from day to day. My hope today is that as we see what Paul writes to the Ephesians we will not only see a familiar concept, but we will begin to experience the spiritual freedom and joy that God wants for us.

First I need to establish some historical context. Prior to Paul's arrival and the arrival of the gospel, the Ephesians were much like everyone else in the world when it came to religion. They had a god that they worshipped – for them it was the goddess Artemis – and they worshipped her in order to try to earn her favor. She was the goddess of fertility and by earning her favor they believed that she would protect their fertility, which was a very important thing. So they would perform certain religious rituals that they believed would be pleasing to her. This was and is the same basic idea behind every religion. Religion requires the worshipper to do certain things in order to obtain the favor of that particular god. The requirement may look drastically different and can range from things like child sacrifice to festive love feasts, but the underlying principle is always the same – do what you've got to do to keep your god happy and in return you will avoid punishment and obtain blessing.

This thinking falls in line with how all of humanity thinks and operates – the world has a performance based system of punishment and reward. You do good things for others to earn reward and if you fail or do bad things you earn punishment. That's just the way the world works. This idea is engrained in us and influences

our thinking about religion – even Christianity. It’s why I struggled so badly after Caleb was born and it’s why so many of us struggle in our relationships with God. We think we need to earn his approval. And that’s how the people in Ephesus thought about religion; that’s all they ever knew – which makes what Paul writes in the first ten verses in chapter 2 so revolutionary.

Read Ephesians 2:1-3.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

He reminds them of their former way of life – just 5 years earlier – when they worshipped Artemis. In seeking to please her, they were dead to God, unable to please him in any way, walking in trespasses and sins against him. They were following the ways of the fallen and corrupt world around them; they were following the ways of Satan – the prince of demons – Artemis was his puppet and by following her, they were following him. They were like everyone else in the world – living in the passions of their flesh, carrying out the desires of their bodies and minds. And they were by nature children of wrath. Their sin was revolting to God.

When I was the youth pastor I got the bright idea to use a road kill skunk as an object lesson at youth group. It was the spring of the year and I found a dead skunk on the side of the road, so I stopped to check it out – it smelled bad, but not too bad, so it was perfect for what I needed, but it was also frozen to the ground, so I went home and grabbed a garbage bag to put it in and a hammer and screwdriver to knock it loose. I went back to the skunk and tried to chisel its frozen body free from the frozen ground underneath it. I tapped a few times, but the ice was too hard, so I raised the hammer for a more powerful blow. When the hammer hit the screwdriver, the point slipped and I punctured the skunk’s body. There was a sack of liquid putrescence around its midsection that apparently had a lower freezing point than the rest of the body, and I nailed it. A burst of yellowish-green liquid shot out and the next thing I knew my nostrils were filled with the most horrific smelling death stench I had ever smelled. A wave of nausea hit me and I immediately started gagging and retching as I stumbled onto the road.

The sin of the Ephesians was repulsive to God and Paul wanted to remind them of that. It was important for them to know that in order to grasp the incredible

significance of what he wrote next. And of course it's vitally important that we understand how offensive our sin is to God as well – *but not to make us wallow in guilt and condemnation – please understand this!* Paul didn't write these things to condemn them or us. He wrote them to highlight the extreme significance of what he writes next.

Read Ephesians 2:4-7.

⁴ *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,*
⁵ *even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—*
*by grace you have been saved—*⁶ *and raised us up with him and seated us with him*
*in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*⁷ *so that in the coming ages he might show*
the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

This is stunning... How should God respond to people as described in verses 1-3? The way the world works and religion works and what's engrained in the way we think is that God should absolutely crush people who behave in such a way – immediate and swift punishment and destruction. The Ephesians, along with the rest of mankind – including us, don't deserve to live. We all deserve punishment and death.

Yet for some stunning reason God does exactly the opposite – he makes us alive and he raises us up and seats us next to him in the highest place of honor and he will shower us with kindness in the ages to come... What?!! This is an idea that should jolt the entire world to attention. This is extremely radical thinking – extremely contrary to human ways and thinking and to the practice of every other religion. Those people deserve nothing but punishment and death, yet God gives them nothing but reward and eternal life... How is this possible? Paul points out in these verses that it's possible because of who our God is and what he has done for us in his beloved Son Jesus Christ.

You see some key words and phrases in what Paul writes. He describes God as being “rich in mercy” and as loving us with a “great love” and as saving us “by grace” – grace that has “immeasurable riches.” God is unlike any other god in that he is not needy or deficient in any way as if he needs humans to behave in a certain way to bring out his good side. He is overflowing with mercy, love and grace in himself without needing any help from us. Because of that, he is able to respond to rebellious people with mercy, love, and grace.

Yet we also know he is holy and just, and that we have sinned greatly against him and we actually deserve punishment and death. How can a holy and just God not

give us what we deserve? Throughout these verses you see a little phrase repeated 5 times – “with Christ” or “in Christ.” Paul says we were made alive together with Christ, we were raised up with Christ and we were seated with Christ. And he says that God did all this for us in Christ and would shower us in the coming ages with immeasurable kindness in Christ.

Everything God has done and will do for us in salvation is through Jesus Christ. God sent his Son to live a perfect life, then to die to take upon himself the punishment for our sin that we deserved, and to rise again and ascend to the right hand of God. And the way that a holy and just God saves rebellious sinners who deserve punishment and death is by uniting us together with Christ so that everything he accomplished in his life, death and resurrection becomes ours. In Christ our sins are no longer counted against us because Christ already paid the penalty for them. In Christ all our guilt is replaced with his righteousness that he earned for us in his life. And in Christ we are made alive to God with him, raised with him and seated with him at the right hand of God to be the objects of his kindness for all eternity.

Because of who he is and what he’s done for us in Christ, God was able to give the Ephesian believers reward and eternal life even though they deserved punishment and death. That kind of God and pathway to salvation was nothing like the Ephesians had ever known or imagined. They were stuck in the worldly perspective of life and religion and this good news would have changed everything. God was completely different than Artemis and did things completely different than any other religion. Worshipping him meant freedom and joy, not obligation and duty. Because of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ, we don’t have to earn his approval and blessing – he gives it to us freely as a gift. That’s what grace is and that’s what our salvation and relationship with God is founded on.

It took me a long time to actually understand and experience that. Before Caleb was born I measured my approval rating with God based on my performance of having a consistent devotional time. As long as I could check that off my list I felt pretty good about myself – like God was pleased with me. But when I couldn’t check it off my list – even after one day – I’d start to feel guilty. You can imagine how I felt when days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months... But God graciously used that time to bring me to the realization that the way he felt about me didn’t depend on my performance and whether or not I could check something off my list – it depended on who I was in Jesus Christ – and that never changed.

Because I was in Christ, and Christ was in me God saw me the same whether I did my devotions or not. My relationship with him was based on his grace and not on my performance and that was revolutionary for me. No longer did I feel the emotional ups and downs of what I considered spiritual success and failure. His love and affection for me was always constant because I was in Christ. So no longer was I motivated to spend time with him or do good works to try to gain his approval. Instead I wanted to do those things because it brought my soul such great delight. Some turn God's grace into a license for laziness or sin, but they will find that only leads to emptiness and rightful conviction and needed discipline. True joy and meaning is found in seeking the Lord and walking in obedience to him.

I think a lot of Christians know the concept of what it means to be saved by grace, but haven't truly experienced grace yet, so even though they are Christians, they're trapped in a worldly system of religion and have never experienced freedom and joy in the Lord, and my prayer is that God may use this passage and this sermon to help you see the difference. Paul gives a summary then of these things and this radical new way of looking at religion in verses 8-10.

Read Ephesians 2:8-10.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

You can see how he ties it all together. Salvation is by grace as we have seen, realized and experienced through faith. And this is all a gift of God – even faith – it's all undeserved and unearned in any way so no one can boast. God has done all this for a purpose – we are his workmanship, his masterpiece – I picture him as a great Sculptor shaping and molding us into what he wants us to be. He created us in Christ Jesus and saved us by his grace, not as an end in itself, but so that we would do good works that he has prepared for us to do. Good works that bring him glory and bring us joy, but don't win his approval.

So I'm guessing that some of you needed to hear this today because like me you have been struggling with feeling like God's approval of you changes from day to day based on your performance. On the good days, when you're performing well, you feel a little pride because God must be happy with you. But on the bad days, when you fail, you feel the shame and guilt because he must be disappointed. Both are false, worldly ways of thinking that Satan wants to keep you trapped in so that you'll either be puffed up with pride or paralyzed by guilt.

That is not how God works. We are saved by grace through faith, in Christ alone. And that changes everything. My hope is that by his grace he will open the eyes of your heart so that you can see and begin to experience that in your life.