

The grace that sparks life

Ephesians 2:1-10

I've had some help this week with my sermon preparation.

I was in a meeting with Erica McKay,
one of our 10:00 am congregation members and she asked how I was,
and I said "I'm struggling for a sermon introduction!
I want to talk about moving from death to life."
And without a moment's hesitation, Erica said
"when floodwaters break into a drought affected area."

Erica is an agricultural scientist, you see,
and so she sees the effect that a sudden flood can make.
Land which looks dead and barren
will suddenly burst into colour after the life giving waters flow into it.

We've seen this in Australia, haven't we?

It's happening right now as the flood waters from Townsville flow
throughout Queensland, down through the channel county to the centre
where they'll end up in Lake Eyre.

Here's a before and after shot of what happens to the Lake
Eyre region after it gets watered; brown gives way to green.



Ours isn't the only country where we can observe barren landscapes coming back to life. This is a shot of the Atacama desert in Chile as it is usually seen, and here is the same scene some weeks after rain. Look at that sea of purple!



You know, if we believe in a God who not only created the world
but also continues to sustain it,
then this tells us something about him, doesn't it?

It tells us that God loves to bring life where there is death.
And if this is true for desert landscapes,
then how much more is it true for people!

As we continue on in our series in Ephesians
we come to a passage which celebrates this life giving activity of God.

God is in the business of breathing life into that which is dead,
 And this includes men, women and children,
 who without God's life-giving activity,
 remain dry, unfruitful and without hope for the future.

It may come as surprise to some that I'm describing humanity as a desert,
 but before Paul speaks of the life that God brings
 he does describe the need we have for his intervention.
 You may ask yourself "Is the situation we find ourselves in really that dire?"
 Well, let's hear Paul speak and let's see if we really are as dead as I suggest.

Paul begins our passage with these words in Ephesians 2:1
 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.
 Two words are used by Paul to describe our human failings,
 he speaks of *transgressions* and also of *sins*.
 We are probably more familiar with the idea of *transgressions*.
 To *transgress* is to cross a boundary;
 to do something or go somewhere that breaks a rule.
 God has said *do not lie*,
 but I'll tell the boss there was traffic
 when I was really having an extra coffee at the café.

But the idea behind the word *sin* is a little different,
 it's more like falling short of an ideal, the failure to do something right.

Some years ago I remember arriving home one day after work
 To find my neighbour on her porch in quite a bit of discomfort.
 She told me that she was waiting for a taxi to take her up to the doctor
 because her fingers were swollen. I said ... "I hope the taxi arrives soon"
 And I went inside. 2 minutes later the neighbor on the other side arrives,
 and upon hearing about the problem says "hop in my car I'll drive you up"
 I heard the conversation from my kitchen,
 and was immediately convinced that I had sinned;
 not because I had committed some kind of crime,
 but because I had failed to do what was right.
 I wonder if that has ever been your experience, failing to do what is right?
 When we look at it this way,
 sin might be a little more common than what we think!

And the result of our sin is very serious.

Paul says we were dead in our transgressions and sins.
 These actions (or lack of action) leave us as little more than corpses.

Now hearing this some might say, "*What are you talking about?*
You didn't drop down dead when you refused to drive your neighbor to the
doctor, you were able to walk inside, there are plenty of living sinners!"

Paul is talking about being dead in a spiritual sense,
 And there are plenty of people who have no spiritual pulse whatsoever.
 They have no interest in picking up the Bible,
 they have no interest in meeting together with God's people in fellowship,
 not interested in living to please God in an ever-increasing fashion,
 no sensitivity to the Holy Spirit convicting them of sin,
 certainly no trust in Jesus as Lord and savior. Spiritually they're *dead*.

Physically they're alive,
 and what life they do have is marked, not by a focus on God,
 but by a focus on the world around them
 and on how they might use that world to fulfill their own desires,
 have a look at verse 2: It was our transgression and sins in which we used to
 live when we 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.

There is a quote from an American writer named David Foster Wallace where he
 says that "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships."
 And we see the truth of that quote here in Ephesians.
 If you are dead to God then that doesn't mean that you are somehow neutral,
 it means you will get your direction from somewhere else.
 In fact, Paul says that the alternative direction
 is provided by three things coming together.

First of all Paul says that our transgressions and sins
 are a product of us following the ways of this world.
 Why didn't I stop and help my neighbor? I excused it by saying to myself
"I'm too busy. I've got things to do."
 And that's how our world has conditioned us hasn't it?
*"Can't be lazy, got to be busy, got to get things done,
 let other people solve their own problems."*

And that's only one way that they world would have us think.
*"be true to yourself, don't say anything offensive,
 don't get caught on the wrong side of history. It's outside beauty that matters,
 You'll actually enjoy having an affair,*
 The list of wordly rules and advice seems endless!

And we must be careful when the world presents these rules and influences
 because it's a shock to learn who might be lurking behind them.
 Paul speaks of the ruler of the kingdom of the air,
 the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.
 Paul is identifying Satan as the force
 behind many of the human influences that seek to inform us

I remember as a high school student reading a Christian article that said something like “Satan has a field day during WW2”.
 I remember rolling my eyes and thinking
 “WW2 was a human issue, not a spiritual one.”
 Well, Paul might disagree with me.
 In these verses he’s linking human evil with Satan himself.

And we should be wary of our own weaknesses too. Verse 3

All of us also lived among them at one time,
 gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.
 Why did I not help my neighbor? I told myself it was because I was busy,
 but remember, I heard the subsequent conversation from my kitchen
 while I was preparing a snack!
 Not too busy to forgo gratifying a physical craving!

And we make excuses like this all the time, don’t we?

“I have physical needs, therefore I will ...”
 and you can fill in the blank all sorts of different ways.
 “I will sleep with this person,
 I will purchase this product even though it’s been produced immorally,
 I will withhold my time, effort and resources
 from those in greater need than me.”

Sin runs deep, there’s no escaping it,

and Paul says in verse 3 that all of us have lived like this.
 I remember speaking to a youth group member at an old church
 where he was denying that sin was really a problem for him.
 And so I pointed to his phone and said
 “Do you think this product has come about
 without someone getting hurt somewhere along the track?
 Without the use of cheap labor in dangerous conditions?”
 And he said “I’ve never thought of that”.
 We’re all implicated in sin, sometimes in ways we haven’t even realized.

And then at the end of it all, we find God’s anger is waiting

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath, Paul says at the end of verse 3.
 I mean, it would be strange if God wasn’t angry at the way we treat him
 and the world he’s created;
 at the way we serve ourselves over others.
 When God gets angry it’s never impulsive or unfair,
 It’s a righteous anger directed at sin and those who are sinners.

But it’s also an anger that can be overcome.

You get a sense of this possibility in the way Paul says
 we *were* deserving of wrath. We *were* deserving.
 Something happened which means God’s anger is no longer directed at us.

And that something is what fills the rest of our passage.

Verse 4: 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.

Just like God sends rain to bring a desert back into bloom,
so too he provides grace—an undeserved mercy—
to bring life to those who are dead in their transgressions.

And the mercy that Paul is thinking of here is that of being made alive *with Christ*.
How is it that God brings life to the dead? By uniting us with Christ.

My wife explains being united with Christ like this

(she actually heard it from Glenn Davies our archbishop
when he was Jasmine's parish minister).

Think about what it's like being in a plane.

The plane hurtles down the runway at 300km an hour,

and because you are in the plane,

you are hurtling down the runway at 300kph,

When the plane leaves the ground, you are leaving the ground,

When the plane cruises 12 km above the earth,

you're 12 km above the earth

And when the plane lands again, you also return to the ground.

What ever happens to the plane happens to you.

Even if you don't feel as if you are moving that fast, the fact is *you are*.

And so it is when, through our belief in Christ, we are united with him.

Jesus dies to pay for sin on the cross,

so we have died to pay for sins on the cross,

Jesus was raised to life again with a body that will last forever,

and so we will be raised to life again with a body that will last forever.

Whatever happens to Jesus happens to us,

which is good news for people who are dead in their sins;

our unification with Christ brings a new spirit and eventually a new body.

And this is all because God loves us:

But because of his great love for us God made us alive with Christ

You know sometimes people will spend a lot of money repairing an old vehicle,
or perhaps they might restore an old house.

And it might actually be more cost effective to buy something new.

So why do they do it? Because they value the original creation,

they want to see it renewed even if the cost is excessive,

and so it is with the cost of our own revival, it cost the death of Jesus,

but such is God's love for us that this cost was not spared.

And this was only the beginning of his affection for us

In verse 6 Paul explains that 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.

Our Spirits have already been resurrected and are with Jesus.

This is why the Christian person can say no to sin and yes to Christ, because we are already renewed spiritually.

However, it's not always easy to say no to sin and yes to Jesus,

because our spirits are still connected with our earthly bodies.

As we learnt in v3, it's our earthly bodies that makes sin difficult to resist.

But Paul says there is more blessing to come in the future,

when out of his kindness God will grant us even more riches, including a new body, within which we will not be able to sin.

Manufacturers are always coming out with new models, aren't they?

Be they software developers or, vehicle makers,

even Thermomix update their models,

and the bugs are ironed out and the performance improves.

So it is with humanity version 2.0; a new body which will be sin-proof.

But unlike a new product, we don't have to buy it, we don't have to earn it,

It's all a gift because of God's grace: Verse 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.

Christians should be identifiable by our lack of boasting.

Just like everyone else, we are sinners in need of grace,

and just like every other Christian,

our sins are only overcome because of the action of God. We add nothing.

The only thing we can do is put our faith in Christ,

and even our ability to believe and trust, even our faith *is itself* a gift of God.

The good works come later, which is what Paul says in verse 10

we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,

which God prepared in advance for us to do. Good works are important

but God is the one who gets to work on us beforehand.

He has to work on us ahead of time, because *we're dead!*

Being a Christian isn't about getting your life together first,

Don't make that mistake because you'll never get there,

you'll never get into a position where you'll be good enough for God;

dead people can't do much for themselves.

You need God to act, to reanimate your life,

so that your sins are accounted for, and so your new life can begin.

And friends today is a great day to ask God to apply Christ's work to you.

It's a great day to put your trust in Jesus,
so that you become unified with him,
allowing your present and future life to come into full bloom.

We live in a world where we often want to destroy each other,
either through gossip, or violence.
But God is the God of life and he wants to revive you.
Accept his grace and live! Let's pray.

Heavenly father, we praise you as the one who brings life to not only barren landscapes but also to dead people, we praise you for your great love for us, a love that provides for our restoration, and we recognize that our sins have left us in dire need of the new life that only you can bring. So we place our trust in Jesus, and we ask that we might become connected to him, so that through him we might receive life. And we trust that this new life will enable us to live differently, to do the works you would have us do. In Jesus name, Amen.