Resurrected

God provides salvation by grace through faith apart from our good works.

The hymn “Amazing Grace” stands as one of the most beloved and widely recognized songs in the modern world. Versions of it are publicly played and sung countless times every year. While the song's original lyrics were written as an ode to the Christian gospel, numerous secular musicians and singers in the modern era have recorded the song because of its message of transforming grace and deliverance for people in times of trouble, fear, and danger.

What is most striking to me about this beloved song is the story behind the hymn text, first published in England in 1779. John Newton, the writer, was an obscure English poet and Anglican pastor. Newton grew up without any religious convictions, however, and was conscripted into the British Royal Navy as a young man. After completing his military service, he became involved in the Atlantic slave trade. Then in 1748, a violent storm battered his ship off the coast of Ireland, threatening to tear the vessel apart and drown everyone aboard. In desperation, Newton called out to God for mercy—an event he later confessed was the moment of his conversion to faith in Christ.

In response to God's gracious deliverance and his newfound faith, Newton ended his slave trading career and began studying Christian theology. He was ordained as a minister by the Church of England in 1764 and began writing hymn texts alongside another English poet, William Cowper. Newton wrote the original lyrics for “Amazing Grace” to illustrate a sermon for New Year’s Day, 1773. He wanted to convey the message that God’s grace is limitless. Forgiveness of sins and salvation are possible for all who will simply believe.
(chaps. 1–3), he addressed doctrinal teachings that were especially relevant for the urgent needs and life situations of believers in Ephesus. Then in the second half of the letter’s main body (chaps. 4–6), he focused primarily on helping the recipients integrate right doctrine into their daily life situations.

Beginning in chapter 2, Paul launched into a deep theological dive regarding the doctrine of salvation. He had already seeded the waters with the issue in his doxology and thanksgiving prayer (1:3-23). In 2:1-7, he turned from magnifying Christ the Redeemer to describing the dark reality of what it means to be lost and without hope. He used several descriptions, but perhaps his starkest term to depict spiritual lostness was the word dead. Then he contrasted the reality of spiritual deadness with the new life believers receive in Christ. Again, Paul used several terms for this reality, but alive is the term that encompasses all of them.

In Ephesians 2:8-10, Paul provided a succinct yet glorious expression of the gospel message, using rich theological terms such as grace, faith, and saved. Many believers who first received Paul’s epistles were neither highly educated or from the upper social or economic classes. Yet Paul knew that the Holy Spirit would help these recipients understand the simple gospel message. They were ordinary people who had experienced an extraordinary transformation.

So it is for many believers today. The same Holy Spirit who enabled the first recipients of Ephesians to grasp and embrace the deep spiritual truths of the letter can also open the eyes of our hearts today.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

ONCE DEAD (Eph. 2:1-3)

Paul reminded the recipients of his letter that before their salvation in Christ, they were spiritually dead. They were also bound in their sins by Satan.

VERSE 1

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins

Paul was soberly honest about the status of humanity apart from Christ. He knew the desperate condition of the human heart. Human beings in their sinful nature cannot boast of being basically good people who make occasional mistakes. Paul emphatically declared that without faith in Christ, even so-called good people are dead in their trespasses and sins.

By using the second-person plural pronoun you, Paul was likely addressing Gentile believers in Ephesus in particular. In 2:3, the apostle switched to the
use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” so as to include Jewish believers (including himself) in the pronouncement against those who were under sin’s curse apart from Christ. Paul wrote a similar inclusive message in Romans 3:23: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Paul used the term dead in this context to describe people who are spiritually alienated from God and are incapable of having a living relationship with Him. God warned the first humans in the garden that rebelling against Him and disobeying His commands would result in their death (Gen. 2:17). Adam and Eve sinned anyway, and they died spiritually. Further, physical death became inevitable, and eternal separation from God became their destiny unless they received God’s merciful remedy for their disobedience. Scripture often describes the present condition of every human being apart from Christ as dead because of sin (Ezek. 37:1-14; Rom. 7:10; Col. 2:13).

Why are unsaved human beings void of spiritual life? Paul answered the question in terms of trespasses and sins. These two terms are similar, but there are subtle distinctions. To trespass is to cross a known boundary or to willingly deviate from the right path. To sin is to miss an expected mark or fall short of an expected target. Together, these words encompass both active wrongdoing (committing sins) and passive wrongdoing (refusing to do what is right). All human beings apart from Christ stand guilty of both kinds of wrongdoing.

It is important for us to square the biblical teaching that all unforgiven sinners are spiritually dead with our perception that many people—even those who have openly rejected Christ—appear very much alive and are capable of doing commendable activities. Are such people really dead? Yes indeed, in terms of eternal, spiritual matters. They are unable to know God, to love Him, or to relate to Him in any genuine way. In other words, they are as spiritually unresponsive to God as a corpse would be to any other living being. Until sinners recognize and admit the reality of their spiritual deadness to God, they cannot (and will not) embrace the wonderful possibility of new life in Christ.

VERSE 2

in which you previously lived according to the ways of this world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient.

Paul continued describing the condition of people apart from Christ by saying they previously lived (“once walked,” ESV) in a form of slavery they could not escape. Their lifestyle or behavior was opposed to God and His ways. Three influences combined in holding unbelievers captive.
First, they are bound by the ways of this world. Here the term this world was not so much a reference to the physical earth as to fallen humanity organized without submission to God. The values of secular humanism do not take God and His ways into account; such values are, in fact, hostile to God. The widespread presence of political and economic oppression readily illustrate the sinful operation of the world in rebellion against God.

Second, unbelievers are enslaved by the ruler (“prince,” KJV; ESV) of the power of the air. This is a reference to Satan. With the term rendered air, Paul again was speaking figuratively. He had in mind not so much the earth’s atmosphere of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and so forth but rather the invisible, spiritual realm in which Satan and other evil spirits operate (see Eph. 6:12). While unbelievers may not acknowledge the presence and deadly impact of Satan, their unbelief does not negate the reality. In fact, their willing spiritual blindness serves as evidence of Satan’s enslaving power over them (2 Cor. 4:4).

The apostle went on to describe the condition of the unbeliever’s bondage as the spirit now working in the disobedient. Here Paul obviously was not referring to the Holy Spirit. Rather, he was referring either to Satan as an evil spirit or to the general atmosphere or spirit of rebellion against God that permeates the fallen world. The disobedient (“children of disobedience,” KJV) refers to unbelievers, people who defy God and His ways. By way of contrast, believers are described as “children of (moral) light” in passages such as Ephesians 5:8 and 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

VERSE 3

We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also.

The third influence contributing to the bondage of sinful humanity is our fleshly desires (“the cravings of our flesh,” NIV). The apostle did not use the term fleshly here in reference only to natural physical appetites (hunger and thirst, for example) but rather to the unyielding bent toward self-gratification that characterizes humanity’s sinful nature. Of course, natural appetites for food and drink can be distorted by self-gratification to gluttony and drunkenness. In every situation in which self-centeredness prevails, enslavement to fleshly desires is on display.

This enslavement becomes inescapable apart from Christ because of what Paul called the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts (“the desires of the body and the mind,” ESV). The unbeliever’s bent toward self-worship and self-gratification rejects God’s revealed instructions about the right ways to
keep one’s physical appetites and behavior under spiritual control. Instead, the unbeliever adopts thoughts and behaviors that are governed by attitudes such as “If it feels good, do it,” “I did it my way,” and “You only live once, so grab all you can.” All of these attitudes are just modern-day versions of Satan’s ancient lie to Eve in the garden of Eden: “God knows that when you eat [fruit from the forbidden tree] your eyes will be opened and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5).

Paul moved on from describing unbelievers as spiritually dead and as enslaved to a declaration that they are by nature children under wrath. That is, apart from Christ all sinners are justly condemned by God. The term wrath refers to God’s righteous opposition to evil and His settled determination to oppose everything contrary to His holiness (see Rom. 1:18-20; 2:5).

The sad truth is that we are all members of a fallen human race. We inherited a sinful nature after Adam and Eve’s fall into sin in the garden of Eden. Further, our own trespasses and sins confirm that we have followed in the first couple’s sinful ways (see Rom. 5:12). Paul painted a dark but honest word picture that, apart from Christ, all persons are separated from God and are destined to experience His wrath in the judgment. It is therefore urgent for believers to share the gospel message with all the world’s peoples.

**NOW ALIVE** (Eph. 2:4-7)

Paul declared that those who believe in Christ have been made alive as an act of God’s grace. This salvation is offered based on God’s love for us. Believers receive a position “in the heavens” based on Jesus’ own exalted position.

**VERSE 4**

**But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us,**

The phrase but God marks a radical transition from the plight of sinners to the hope of the saved. The contrast from bondage to salvation could not be more sharply drawn. Paul identified two attributes of God that propelled Him
to provide the way of rescue and freedom for sinners. First, Paul noted God’s **mercy**. This term is parallel to the concept of grace. *Mercy* can be thought of as God’s not giving believers what they deserve—namely, His wrath. Grace can be described as God’s giving believers what they do not deserve—namely, His forgiveness and restoration to life. God’s mercy led Him to seek to save sinful human beings from spiritual death, the wages of their sin (Rom. 6:23). The apostle’s description of the desperate state of unbelievers (dead, enslaved, and condemned) shows that we were helpless and hopeless. God is not only a God of mercy, He is **rich** in mercy. His mercy does not run short; He lavished the riches of His grace on believers (Eph. 1:7; 2:7).

Second, Paul drew attention to God’s **love**. In the Greek text, he used both a noun form and a verb form of this rich biblical term. Literally, the phrase reads “because of the great love with which he loved us” (see ESV). Just as God’s mercy is **rich**, even so His love is **great**. God acted to save us out of His wonderful love, not because we could do anything to deserve salvation.

**VERSE 5**

**made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!**

In describing the salvation God gives in Christ, Paul affirmed first that God **made** believers **alive with Christ**. Before trusting in Christ, believers were spiritually dead; in Christ they have been given new life, eternal life. Just as Christ died on the cross and was resurrected, even so when the Ephesian believers were joined to Christ by faith, they were made alive spiritually. To emphasize the transformation, Paul again reminded the letter’s recipients that they (and he) once **were dead in trespasses**.

Paul’s language soared into a hymn-like quality with his ringing declaration, **you are saved by grace**. He repeated these exact words in 2:8. Two points are noteworthy. First, the form of the verb translated **are saved** implies that the action was completed in the past yet its effects are ongoing. Compare this to the same verb form that Paul used to refer to Christ’s having been raised with ongoing results (1 Cor. 15:20). Second, Paul declared that salvation is an act of God’s **grace**. Previously in Ephesians 2:4, he had used the related concepts of divine “mercy” and “love.” *Grace* appears to be one of Paul’s favorite terms, for he began most of his epistles with a greeting expressed in terms of grace.

**VERSE 6**

**He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,**
If the first truth about God’s salvation is that believers are made alive in Christ, the second truth is that God raised believers up with him. Paul was referring here to the historical events of Christ’s resurrection and ascension into heaven. Christ was exalted from the earthly, visible realm to the heavenly, invisible realm (see Acts 1:9). Even so, when believers are united to Christ by faith, they are made alive forever in the wonderful realm of spiritual existence Christ inhabits.

The third truth about God’s salvation Paul noted was that believers are seated … with Christ in the heavens. Here Paul was referring to the truth that the resurrected and ascended Christ took His rightful place of lordship and authority at the right hand of the Father (see Acts 2:33-35; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 10:12). Because believers are joined to Christ by faith and in essence are His body, they are spiritually seated with Him in the heavenly realm. This is now the third time in the letter that Paul referred to a heavenly, invisible reality (see also 1:3, 20). Although the church continues to exist on earth and to experience the challenges that reality presents, in God’s eternal view His redeemed people already have been forgiven, are made spiritually alive, and are seated with Christ on His heavenly throne. Believers will experience the fulness of that reality in the end time in the new heaven and the new earth.

When the apostle wrote about the three truths of salvation believers receive in union with Christ, he probably coined some new words. Literally, the phrases could be translated “we were co-made alive with,” “we were co-raised with,” and “we were co-seated with.” These phrases emphasize that everything to do with salvation flows from what Christ has done for us and then what happens to us when we believe and are united to Him in faith.

VERSE 7
so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

After having described what God did in saving believers based on His mercy, love, and grace, Paul went on to describe God’s ultimate reason for saving believers. Why did He act to save sinners? What was His goal? The reason certainly was not that sinful human beings deserved or had earned the right to be saved. Paul explained that God wanted a redeemed people to be the everlasting proof of His grace.

God intends for the proof of His grace to endure throughout the coming ages, including during the remainder of the church age as well as during the age to come following Christ’s glorious return and the judgment. God will have His redeemed people on display in eternity as evidence of the immeasurable riches of his grace. God’s raising of Christ was proof of the
“immeasurable greatness of his power” (1:19-20). His future display of those who are united with Christ by faith will be the proof of immeasurable grace. We can scarcely imagine what these immeasurable riches will be. The New Testament provides delectable hints in the language of a coming messianic banquet (see Matt. 8:11; Rev. 19:7-9).

Thus, in the coming ages we as believers will keep on expressing our love and worship of God for all He has done for us. He, in turn, will display us as evidence of His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. The term rendered kindness is similar in meaning to the terms mercy and grace. It can also mean goodness in reference to consideration for the welfare of another. God’s intent is to express His kindness eternally to those who are in Christ Jesus.

EXPLORE FURTHER
Paul used four terms to describe God’s character in providing salvation for believers: mercy, grace, love, and kindness. What do each of these terms mean to you as a believer? Which of the terms seems especially relevant to your situation in life at this time? Why?

THROUGH GRACE ALONE (Eph. 2:8-10)
Salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. It is an act of God’s grace toward His fallen creation. Salvation cannot be earned; it is received only as a gift. Our salvation sets us free to live a life of good works.

VERSE 8
For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—

Paul here repeated his declaration in Ephesians 2:5 that sinners are saved by grace. Thus far, the apostle’s emphasis has been on God’s taking the initiative in providing the way of salvation. Paul now emphasized that salvation by grace nevertheless demands a human response—the response of faith. Saving faith is not a work, an achievement or effort on the part of the sinner. It is simply a humble, grateful, wholehearted acceptance of Christ’s saving work on the sinner’s behalf. In the Greek language of the New Testament, the noun faith and the verb form usually translated “believe in” or “trust in” belong to the same word family. Thus, passages that speak of believing in Christ for salvation (John 3:16, for example) connect directly with Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 2:8 about faith.
Paul went on to clarify that even faith must not be construed as the believer’s doing any work to accomplish his or her salvation: saving faith is not from yourselves. The term this refers to the entire concept of being saved by grace through faith. All of salvation is from God. Sinful human beings could never have come up with salvation, much less achieved it. Paul had already spoken of God’s initiative by using the language of mercy, kindness, and love. Now he added a new term: gift. Salvation in its totality, including the sinner’s response of faith, is a gift from God.

Of course, saving faith does not mean believing something that is contrary to fact or believing in faith itself. Saving faith is based on evidence of truth. Thus, the first disciples believed Jesus was raised from the dead because His tomb was empty and He appeared to them alive after three days. Further, saving faith is not merely an intellectual assent to a set of facts. For example, a person might assent to the “facts” that a ladder provides access to a rooftop. However, the person hasn’t truly trusted the ladder until his full weight is placed on it. This example must not be pressed too far, but the point is that saving faith is more than merely assenting to historical facts about Jesus. It involves trusting one’s entire life and future to Christ as Savior.

VERSE 9

not from works, so that no one can boast.

Paul went on to make a second clarification about salvation. It is not from one’s own works. In other words, there is not a single good deed or act of obedience—or a lifetime of striving on one’s own—that God will reward with salvation. There is nothing that we as sinners can do to deserve or earn the gift of forgiveness, new life, and right standing (justification) before God. There is no room for human merit in salvation.

By the term works, Paul was including obedience to God’s laws, as he emphatically stated in Galatians 2:16: “By the works of the law no human being will be justified.” He was also including deeds of kindness or benevolence, as welcome as such actions might be by others. The dangerously mistaken notion that people can stock up enough good deeds to outweigh their sins in God’s
eyes must be jettisoned from our thinking. Paul contended that salvation by God’s grace through faith nullifies any possibility of self-justification (so that no one can boast). The only possible attitude for sinners to take before God is to cling to Him in humility and complete dependence. The only pride anyone can have is in the cross and in the Savior (Gal. 6:14; Phil. 3:3).

VERSE 10

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

Paul now made a positive assertion: salvation is God’s achievement (we are his workmanship). The Greek term rendered workmanship includes the ideas of “work of art” and “masterpiece.” What God has accomplished both in creation and in salvation are displays of His sovereign and gracious work as the Creator-Redeemer. Believers have been created in Christ Jesus. We have become new creations (2 Cor. 5:17).

We have been made alive. (We were dead.) We have been set free. (We were enslaved.) We have been saved. (We were condemned.) We have been made into new creatures, but we are not to remain passive. We have much to do. We are never saved by good works, yet we are saved for good works. Good deeds can never be the root of salvation, but they are the fruit of salvation.

Indeed, God prepared ahead of time the good works His redeemed people are to accomplish. This way of understanding salvation encompasses life from the moment of conversion to the fulfillment of eternal life in heaven and everything in between. In the original language, the phrase for us to do can be translated literally as “that we should walk.” Thus, Paul had come full circle. In 2:2 he had described the sinful ways in which sinners lived prior to their conversion to Christ. Now the contrast was clear. What makes the difference? Divine intervention “by grace” (2:5,8). The telling contrast between the two destinies is captured in two little words, “but God” (2:4).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Meditate on Ephesians 2:8-9. How would you paraphrase these verses to help someone understand the way of salvation through faith in Christ? With whom could you seek an opportunity to share these verses?