

This Is Your Life, Part 4

Ephesians 2:1-10

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Turn with me again to Ephesians 2 as we continue our study of this great book, and of the first paragraph of this second chapter, where we have explained for us how exactly it was that we who are so sinful came to enjoy and benefit from the rich spiritual blessings that we studied together in chapter 1. Here in a sense is God's sovereign purpose, not for the world as a whole, but for the individuals on whom He has set His love. Let me read this paragraph for you. Ephesians 2, beginning in verse 1. Paul writes,

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

If you're a Christian here this morning, this is your life. This, in a sense, is your spiritual biography. Because it describes how God in an act of sovereign grace brought us out of spiritual death into life. Throughout this entire paragraph, Paul is playing just one string. There is just one message he really wants us to understand and get here, from this paragraph, and that is that salvation is entirely a work of God from beginning to end. Salvation is entirely a work of God. The spiritual rescue of our souls is initiated by God, is carried out by God, and will be completed by God.

He begins by reminding us in these first three verses of what we were. What we were when God found us. And this is what we have been studying together. He tells us our true condition, verse 1, "and you were dead." That is, we were dead with reference to God,

unable to respond to Him in any way, unable to do anything good. The root cause of that condition, the end of verse 1, “in your trespasses and sins.” Or on account of or by reason of trespasses and sins. The practical results of our condition come in verse 2, in which, that is in those trespasses and sins “you formerly walked.” The practical results of our spiritual death was a life of sin. We thought we were free, but Paul tells us here that in fact we were slaves, that our lives were in perfect step with three powerful forces, three forces that controlled our thinking, that directed our decisions, and that dominated our lifestyles. These forces, according to verses 2 and 3 are the world, the flesh, and the devil. We walked according to, or in step with these three great forces.

We’ve looked at the first two of them. Verse 2 begins by telling us we lived in step with the world. Notice verse 2 says, “we walked according to the course of this world.” That is, we conducted our lives in lockstep with the mindset and values of the times in which we lived.

Last week, we discovered the second great force that was a part of our lives before Christ, and that is the devil. We lived in step with the devil himself. Verse 2 adds that we walked according to the prince of the power of the air, the prince of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. As we saw last week, there is a personal being of incredible power and evil, and according to God he rules over the spiritual atmosphere that is at work in those who are dead to God. Satan’s primary objective is to blind the minds of unbelievers to the living God, to the true and real Jesus, and to the saving gospel. And how does he do that? How does he promote that blindness? As we saw last week, he promotes human philosophy and ideology. He promotes false religion. He corrupts the true gospel and distorts the true Christ in cults and all kinds of deviations from the true Christianity. He prevents the spread of the gospel by hampering world missions, by persecuting Christians. And if none of that works, he comes to a true church where the true God is worshipped, where the true Christ is preached, where the true gospel is set forth, and he produces, sitting in the pews, false believers. “Tares,” Jesus called them. They look like the real thing, but they’re not. This is what Satan does, and we walked in perfect step with that religious system that he had established. All of us can find ourselves in one of those strategies of Satan before we came to faith in Christ.

Now that brings us to the third powerful force that used to dominate our lives as a practical result of our spiritual deadness. Not only were we in step with the world, and we were in step with the devil, but verse 3 adds, we lived in step with the flesh. Look at verse 3. “Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind.” He begins with the little expression, ‘among them.’ That refers back to the end of verse 2, the last group mentioned there--the sons of disobedience. We lived among the sons of disobedience. In other words, we lived among

those whose nature is active disobedience to God. We were rebels together. You know, the Bible describes a sort of camaraderie among those who are in sin against God. Paul puts it this way in Romans 1:32. After that terrible list of sins, Paul says, “although they [that is humanity] know the ordinance of God, they understand these things are wrong, they have the law of God written on the heart, although they know these things are wrong, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do them, but they give hearty approval to those who practice them.” There is a camaraderie among sinners. There is a band of brothers, if you would, a spirit like that, among unbelievers who band themselves against God. Among them, we too all formerly lived.

Now notice the two important words at the beginning of verse 3. “We all.” You see the condition verse 3 describes is universal in its application. There are no exceptions. Apart from God’s miraculous intervention and the person of Jesus Christ, there has never been a human being who cannot be described in verse 3. Among the sons of disobedience, we all, Paul says, lived. “Lived,” it’s a very interesting word. It doesn’t look like it on the surface, the way it’s translated here, but the Greek word literally means ‘we turned back, and turned back, and turned back.’ We all turned back to the same behavior again and again and again. It describes habits, patterns of behavior that we returned to over and over again.

In fact, the word picture behind this verb translated ‘lived’ here is a rut that you just cannot get out of. I understand that. I grew up in South Alabama, and as I think I’ve told you before, when I was growing up, our family owned an old World War II army issue red Willys Jeep. And it was quite a sight to see a family of twelve on this jeep. We had more fun riding around and blazing trails with that jeep because we lived on the edge of civilization. We lived in a suburb of a suburb of a suburb of Mobile. In fact, we lived on the edge of Tillman’s Corner, just to give you an idea of how far out we were, and there was nothing beyond us. We were the last subdivision, and beyond us there were hundreds of acres of swamp and woods. And so our jeep cut trails all over those woods. And everywhere we went with that jeep, just beneath several inches of pine straw was red Alabama clay. So what do you get when you mix a jeep and Alabama red clay and an annual rainfall of 54 inches, the most in the continental US? A lot of fun for a bunch of kids. Because if we took the same trail just a few times, the tires on that jeep cut deep ruts into the clay, where the bottom of the jeep would actually drag the ridge between them. And so, if you did that very often you had to be very careful as you came back through. And I remember a number of times, driving that jeep as a young boy, and desperately trying to keep the wheels balanced on that middle mound that had been formed between the ruts, and the other side. And trying desperately not to slip back into the rut. And you could do that for a little while. But if it had rained at all and the ground was wet at all it wasn’t long until you felt the tires slipping and sliding, and you found yourself right back

in the rut. That's the picture behind this word 'lived.' It means that no matter how hard we tried, before Christ we kept slipping back into the same rut over and over again. What was this rut to which we returned again and again? Notice verse 3. "We all lived in the lusts of our flesh." There's the rut we kept on going over and over again to. Now the word for flesh here is the Greek word *sarx*. It's a word that has a wide range of meaning, but it has two primary meanings in the New Testament. One of them is the material part of people or animals, the body if you will, the material part of us. The other is our corrupt sinful nature. Who we are apart from Christ. The natural inclinations of the sinner to rebel against God's will and God's Word, and it's this second meaning, our corrupt nature that Paul has in mind here. It's our fallen, self-centered, human nature, that's what he means by flesh when it appears here in the first case. As one commentator says, this is life lived in pursuit of one's own ends and in independence of God. That's the flesh.

But specifically here, Paul is not talking about the flesh itself, but about the lusts that are produced by that corrupt human nature. We have a fallen human nature, and that fallen human nature produces lusts. Now the word lust refers to any strong desire. It's the soul's longing for what will give it delight. So when you see this word lust, think strong desire, or maybe the best English equivalent is craving. Now, in English when we hear the word lust we tend to think sexual sin, always bad. In fact, the Greek word translated lust here is a neutral word. It is good or bad depending on the object of what you crave, or the object of your desire. Most often however, in the New Testament, some thirty-five times, it refers not to good desires but to sinful desires. It is any craving for what God has forbidden. It's interesting if you go back to the Old Testament, you look at the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, translated a couple of hundred years before our Lord's birth. In the Septuagint, you will find that this word 'lust' is the word the translators used for the tenth commandment in Exodus 20. You shall not, and we read covet, they used the word 'lust.' You shall not crave; you shall not desire what you shouldn't have. Paul uses it that same way as we'll see in a few minutes in Romans chapter 7. So understand that Paul is saying we have, before Christ, we were encased in, we were completely described by a fallen, corrupt, human nature. And that fallen, corrupt human nature generated cravings, strong desires, for things that we shouldn't have. Powerful cravings of the heart. These desires, these lusts, are part of our depravity. They come to every human heart from Adam through our parents, and they indwell and control fallen men. In fact, the Bible teaches that a constant state of craving or lusting defines what it means to be unregenerate. This is what you define unregenerate nature as.

Turn to Titus 3. In Titus 3:3, Paul puts it like this. He says,

For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, [and notice the next expression--we were] enslaved to various lusts and pleasures.

We were enslaved to our cravings and the pursuit of pleasure. So, this is in fact, how unbelievers act. This is who they are. This is what they do. This is how they think. They are dominated by these cravings. But unbelievers are often unaware of them. These powerful desires often lurk behind the scenes. But in reality, the Bible teaches, it is these cravings or desires that are at the root of every sin. If you think back to before you were a Christian, or even now, every sin you've ever committed didn't just happen. It was given birth to by these cravings that are a part of your fallenness. James even refers to the fact that each of us has his own lusts, his own cravings. You see, every one of us is capable of harboring any lust, but our circumstances, the influence of others, our own inherited propensities, all combine and tend to make us more susceptible to certain cravings or certain lusts.

Now look again at Ephesians 2. What does Paul mean when he says that we lived in the lusts of our flesh? He means that before Christ, these sinful cravings that are a part of our fallenness dominated and drove our lives. We like to think of ourselves as free, but we weren't free at all. Instead, we were driven by these cravings that crawled like loathsome insects out of our souls. And there was nothing we could do to stop them. Now, I know that when you hear this, I'm speaking to people here in the United States, in Texas, in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex who are intelligent, successful people, and you may be sitting there saying to yourself, "I don't know who Paul is thinking of, but that isn't what I was like. I was respectable. I was honorable. I was a decent person. I tried to help other people. I wasn't involved in any gross sin. You know, I really wasn't that bad." Listen, the fact that you didn't think of yourself this way doesn't change the reality, because we are rarely accurate in our own self-assessments. Our self-perception is about as accurate as a carnival mirror. You see, you don't have to know you have cancer to have cancer. You can think you're perfectly well and be dying. Fish don't know they're wet. Why? Because it's so much a part of their environment that they're not even aware of it. In the same way, neither are we. So the fact is, this is how all of us lived.

Now look back at Ephesians 2 again. I want you to notice a crucial change that takes place. Notice the pronouns, verse 1: "you, your." Verse 2; "you walked." Verse 3; "we too." You see at the beginning of verse 3, Paul changes pronouns from the second person plural, you, to the first person plural, we. That doesn't mean that the first two verses didn't describe Paul. They described him and every sinner. But the fact that he now changes pronouns is significant. Paul purposefully includes himself. Now you and I are so accustomed to this that it really doesn't startle us, but if you had known Paul prior to the Damascus Road, you would never have said that Paul lived in the lusts of his flesh. In

fact, notice how Paul describes himself over in Philippians 3. Philippians 3:4, he says, let me tell you what I was like before I came to faith in Christ. He says,

If anyone has a mind to put confidence in the flesh,” I have far more reason to put confidence in the flesh. Verse 5, I was circumcised the eighth day, I was of the tribe--nation of Israel, I was of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the two tribes that stayed faithful to God, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. In other words, I kept my Hebrew culture. I didn't buy into the Greek culture around me. As to the law, I was a Pharisee. As to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to the righteousness which is in God's law, found blameless.

Paul says, listen, if you had looked at me externally, from the outside, before I came to faith in Christ, you wouldn't have seen anything that would have caused you to think I was anything other than a man who loved God and was pursuing God.

With that kind of reputation, how can Paul say that he lived in the cravings of his flesh. I mean we understand this is true of gross sinners. But what about the religious? What about Paul? What about Buddhist priests? What about Mormon elders? What about Roman Catholic priests? What about false teachers on television? What about those people who grow up in a Christian Bible teaching church and family, whose lives seem to be moral? I mean, let's be honest with ourselves. There appear to be a lot of good moral people in the world, like Paul before he became a Christian. How do they live in the lusts of their flesh? Well, remember, Paul just told us he was what? A Pharisee. What did Jesus say about the Pharisees? What was His assessment of the Pharisees in spite of their external conformity to the law of God? Turn back to Matthew 23. Here's how Jesus would have described Paul before he came to faith. Here's how Jesus would describe anyone who appears to be outwardly religious, outwardly a man of God. Jesus says,

Woe, [this is verse 25 of Matthew 23] to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness, [Now watch His conclusion, verse 28] So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

That second word is a very interesting word. You are lawless! You are in absolute unconformity to the law of God inside your heart.

What about others who appear to be religious? What about false teachers for example? You turn on the television and you watch these guys and they give you this impression that they're these wonderfully deeply spiritual people. Listen, if they are outside of Christ, that is a charade. Listen to the apostle Peter, as he describes false teachers. II Peter chapter 2. He says in verse 2, "They will follow their sensuality." Down in verse 10, he says "they indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires." Remember he's talking about false teachers here who appear holy and religious. Verse 13. "They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime". They don't even wait to party for darkness to cover their sin. They're happy to do it during the daytime. "They are stains and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions as they carouse with you, having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed." Peter says, listen, don't you believe the phony face. I don't care how holy they act. I don't care what words they use if they're outside of Christ, this is what they're like. Verse 18 of the same chapter, they speak out "arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality." Verse 19, they promise "freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption." Listen, understand, this is what religious life without Jesus Christ is like. I don't care what it looks like on the outside, and Paul was a perfect example. I just read you from Philippians 3 what he looked like on the outside. To everyone else he looked blameless. Let me show you what Paul said about what was going on in his heart. Turn to Romans 7. This is before his conversion, the first part of Romans 7. Listen to how he describes himself, inside. Verse 5, Romans 7.

For while we were in the flesh [we, notice, Paul's including himself here, that is while we were dead to God, while we had our corrupt nature] the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

You say, wait a minute Paul, you? Yes, me. And he goes on to describe how this happened. Verse 7.

I would not have come to know sin except through the law for I would not have known about coveting [there's our word lust, crave] if the law had not said 'you shall not covet'. You shall not sinfully crave. [But what happened, verse 8.] But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me.

Paul says, let me tell you what was going on in my heart. Here it is. coveting of every sort. I may have looked great on the outside, but what was going on in my heart was

craving--everything you can imagine. Because you see, religion without regeneration cannot control the flesh.

Now there are powerful lessons here for us. Every culture as a whole, listen carefully to me, every culture as a whole lives in the cravings of the flesh, no matter what it may look like on the outside. We live in Texas, and I'm happy to live in Texas. I prefer to live in Texas over California. Texans appear on the surface to be a whole lot more moral than Californians. Christians, don't believe it. It's a facade. It's a charade. According to the word of God, it's not true.

Here's another misperception. The older we get, the more sentimental we become about the past. What about those good old days when everyone was moral and upstanding? Those times never existed, except in your imagination. Okay, it didn't happen. Some cultures and some time periods are better at hiding their true nature, but the Victorian era was not a Christian era. They were more private and hidden with their sins, which we can be grateful for, but it was just as much a reality. What's true of cultures is also true of individuals. There is not a single person who, apart from Christ, doesn't live in the cravings of his flesh. This is true of the low-lifers in the culture who lead the parade toward depravity, those who are the headliners on all the tabloids you see in the grocery store lines, you know the Britney Spears or the Howard Sterns. It's true of them, but it is equally true of the most upstanding outwardly moral and righteous people you can think of who are not Christians. It is true of the religious and of the religious teachers without exception.

Along this line, let me say to you parents, let me give you a little warning. Don't you think for a moment that you are protecting your children from the lusts of the flesh by putting them in a Christian school or by homeschooling them. If they are not Christians, I can guarantee you both biblically and experientially that you are not sheltering them from the lusts of the flesh. Unbelievers will find a way even in the best environment to fulfill the cravings of their fallenness. Wherever a person is without Christ, whether you're talking about the most externally righteous looking one, the Pope, or whether you're talking about the lowest drunk in the gutter, the powerful cravings of the heart dominate and control that person. That's what Paul says.

Paul takes it another step, back in Ephesians 2. Notice what he says in verse 3. We not only lived with these strong cravings or desires, we actually carried them out. We didn't just nurse and coddle these desires inside, we acted on them. We indulged them, is the word he used. Notice verse 3. Indulging, or doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind. Now the word 'desires' here is a different Greek word than the word 'lust.' It means "will." Literally the Greek says this, let me translate it for you. This is how it literally

reads in the Greek text, ‘Doing the wills of the flesh and the thoughts.’ Now by using the plural, ‘wills,’ Paul is pointing out that there are these two different wills that we tend to obey. There are these two different paths, if you will, the lusts of the flesh take. It can take the path of the will of the flesh, or it can take the path of the will of the thoughts.

Let’s look at these two different paths. We did, Paul says, we indulged what the flesh wanted, what the flesh willed. Now what does he mean here? I can’t be dogmatic about this, but it seems to me that Paul is using the same Greek word, the word *sarx*, translated “flesh” here in verse 3, in two different senses in one verse. If he’s not doing this, then he’s just repeating himself, which doesn’t seem to make much sense to me. If I’m right, then the first time the word “flesh” appears, “the lusts of the flesh,” it’s more general. It’s talking about the lusts of our entire corrupt human nature. But the second time the word flesh appears, he’s focusing on the other major way this word is used, and that is in reference to the material man--to the body. It’s the opposite of the mind and the thoughts. We obeyed our bodies, is what Paul is saying. We indulged the will of our bodies, what they wanted. Lloyd-Jones puts it like this,

Paul is thinking here of hunger, thirst, the desire for sleep, the desire for pleasure, the desire for happiness, the desire for contentment, for sex, the desire to attract and be attractive. These things, which in and of themselves are right and good, suddenly take control, and they become imperious in [or that is, little emperors] in their demands. They begin to assert themselves and drive us. These good desires that were given us by God--instead of being our slaves become our masters. And we do the will of the body. What it demands, we say ‘Yes sir!’ and we obey.

There’s another path that the lusts of the flesh take, not only obeying the will of the body, but notice the will of the mind or the will of the thoughts, literally. Whatever our thoughts willed or wanted, we did. Now here, he’s not talking about the sins connected to the body specifically, but he’s talking about the sins that tend to control and dominate our thinking, our thoughts, our minds. At the very lowest level are sins like jealousy and envy, pride, anger, bitterness. Those are the sins of the mind, of the thoughts. But there are also sins of the thoughts that are at a little bit higher level and a more socially acceptable level. Sins like selfish ambition, the desire to get wealthy, the desire for position, for power, for influence, for success. And at the highest level, the sins of the thoughts can manifest themselves as a sinful desire for knowledge, for philosophy or the arts. All of these things, whether it’s the lowest level, whether it’s a socially acceptable level, or even at the highest level, all of these desires of the thoughts and mind dominate and control unbelievers. And sometimes it’s at all levels.

One of the perfect illustrations of this, one of the most troubling illustrations I've ever read is the illustration of a man you probably heard about in school, a 19th century Irish writer called Oscar Wilde. In his time, Oscar Wilde won high awards in literature. But his life was a tragic one that was absolutely lost in the pursuit of the will of the body and the will of his thoughts. Listen to how he described it himself in his book, *De Profundis*. Wilde writes,

The gods have given me almost everything, but I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in search for new sensation. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore, what one has done in the secret chamber, one has someday to cry aloud from the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul and I did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace.

While Oscar Wilde was in prison for the very things he writes about here, he saw them as enslaving, and he wrote those profound words about his condition. But tragically, as soon as he left prison after two years, he returned to the very same sins that he describes here. He was enslaved by the will of the flesh and the will of the thoughts. You and I, while our sins and temptations may have been different than Oscar Wilde's, we had the very same relationship to those cravings. We lived in them. We conducted our lives in them. We returned to them again and again. We indulged them. We did them. We acted them out.

But there is in verse 3, a wonderful word. The first glimpse we get of grace. Look at verse 3, "Among them, we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh." Here's hope, hope because there is power in Christ and in the gospel to rid all of those who will come to Him from the controlling, dominating, enslaving power of sin to freedom. While I am not what I want to be, by God's grace, I am not what I used to be.

We're looking at what we were in these first three verses. We've seen the true condition, the root cause, the practical result. The final element of what we were is found at the very end of verse 3. And here we get God's perspective of us. God's perspective of us. Notice the end of verse 3, "and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest." Don't forget the subject of the sentence. Go back to the beginning of verse 3. "We all." This also was true of every person without exception, and just in case we missed it, notice how Paul

ends verse 3. “Even as the rest.” As the rest of humanity. This was true of us. This was our circumstance. Just as it was everyone else’s. This was God’s perspective of absolutely every human being. It doesn’t matter whether you felt this way or not. This was God’s perspective of you before Christ. We were by nature. That’s an interesting expression and a difficult one to interpret. It’s used several different ways in the New Testament. It can mean “by birth.” That would mean that we were children of wrath simply by being born. And that is possible. But whenever the Bible speaks of God’s wrath against individuals, it is always, without exception, because of their sins. So the biblical order is personal acts of sin followed by wrath. Ephesians 5:6 is a perfect example of that. Paul says, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these [sins I’ve just mentioned, because of these sins] the wrath of God comes.” We have personal guilt from Adam’s sin, but it appears biblically that the wrath of God comes because of our own sin. So ‘by nature’ here, Paul probably means by our natural condition apart from God’s regenerating grace. We could say naturally, we were by nature or naturally, children of wrath. What does that mean? Well, it’s a Hebrew way of saying it. It means “worthy of or deserving of death.” By nature, we were not children of God; we were children of God’s wrath.

Harold Hoehner says, “Unbelievers have a closer relationship to God’s wrath than they do to God himself.” Don’t misunderstand God’s wrath. When we think of wrath we think of sinful anger. God’s wrath is not vindictive. It’s not unrighteous revenge. It is not a sinful outburst of anger. Instead, it is a settled indignation against sin that must punish it. And it’s not mutually exclusive with love, by the way. The same God who had His wrath on us according to verse 3, loved us according to verse 4, and sought us out. So wrath and love are not mutually exclusive. Wrath is God’s settled indignation against our sin. There are so many places where this is taught in scripture. Let me just give you two of them. John 3:36. At the end of that wonderful chapter with John 3:16, John ends this way. “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God [remains] on him.” Like a stain you can’t get rid of. Like a cloud you can’t get out from under. The wrath of God remains on those who do not believe. In Romans 2, Paul puts it like this. He says, verse 5, “because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath [you are stockpiling] wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.” You see, as sinners, you know what we tend to think? We tend to think, you know, God hasn’t done anything yet. Maybe that means I’m okay. Maybe that means He’s actually okay with how I’m living and what I’m doing. That’s so foolish. Paul says, listen, if you are not repentant, if you have not come to faith in Christ, then every moment you live you are stockpiling wrath, and there will come a day when God will pour it out.

This is the reality under which we live, and if you think Christ isn't a part of that wrath, if you think Christ is just all love and He's trying to persuade the Father to accept sinners who haven't repented, then understand that Revelation tells us that Jesus Christ Himself will execute the wrath. Revelation chapter 6 verse 16. Those alive at the end will say "to the mountains and the rocks Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" In Revelation 19, Jesus' picture--in this powerful picture of His treading out the winepress of the wrath of God, it's as if Jesus is stamping out the grapes and out of that vat pours the wrath of God. The most common word picture of God's wrath in the Bible is fire. It's pictured as a fire that absolutely consumes everything in its path. And that, folks, is what you and I could expect from God by nature. But thank God, it's no longer true. I love what Paul says in Romans 5:9, "having been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." Or 1 Thessalonians 1:10. We "wait for His Son from heaven [that is Jesus] who rescues us from the wrath to come."

Now, turn one last time to Ephesians 2. Why is this text here? Remember Paul's purpose in reminding us of all that used to be true of us? Remember that the first three verses we've examined together are the pitch black setting on which God can lay the diamond of God's sovereign grace so that it looks more beautiful because of the background on which it's laid. What Paul wants in these first three verses is us to see that we have absolutely no hope. There is nothing we could have done about our condition, its root cause, or the result. We were objects destined for God's wrath. That's where we were. God intends this picture to destroy all hope outside of Jesus Christ. Everything in me, as I prayed this morning, cries out for God to punish me and to reject me. It's only everything in Christ that calls out for Him to accept me. All we can do is throw ourselves on God's mercy. You remember how Jesus described it in the beatitudes. Matthew 5, He says, "Blessed are the beggars in spirit." Those who come to God and say, "God, I have nothing. I have absolutely nothing to offer You. I have no merits. I have no works. I have no goodness. I have nothing You want. All I can do is beg, please give me mercy. Give me grace. Give me a new heart. Give me a new life." It's like the publican. You remember the story Jesus tells. He shows up at the temple at the time of the sacrifice, and he doesn't even lift up his eyes, but instead, with his head bowed, he beats on his chest, and he says God, be merciful to me, the sinner. That's what Paul wants us to see was our only hope. Peter O'Brien was right. "Only the person who understands something of the greatness of his sin and of God's wrath will be mastered by the greatness of His mercy." Paul thought it was important for us to remember who we were, what we were. That's all the bad news. Verse 4 begins the good news in those two amazing words, "But God."

Let's pray together. Our Father, it is impossible for us to truly see ourselves as You saw us before we came to faith in Christ. We thank You, however, for this glimpse You've given us from the pen of Paul. As we've seen just a little bit of what we must have looked like to You, of how disgusting we were in Your sight. And yet Father, we thank You that in spite of all of that, when we were dead, unable to respond, You loved us and You sent Christ to rescue us from the wrath we deserved. Father, we thank You and praise You. We pray that You would help this study, to help us as we see ourselves. Help us to see the greatness of Your mercy, that if You had not intervened, we would still be dead. We would still be trapped by these forces that controlled us, and we would still be the objects of Your wrath, and we would be for all eternity. Father, stir in our hearts a new and deep abiding gratitude for what You have done. Truly, our spiritual rescue was all of You from beginning to end. We could contribute nothing. Help us to see it, and help us Father to realize that our lives are not our own, that we've been bought with a price. Help us to live for Him who loved us and gave Himself up to rescue us. We pray it in His name. Amen.