

Salvation: From Death to Life **Ephesians 2:1-10**

“Are You Saved?”

Imagine you're on an airplane, seated next to a talkative neighbor. If you ever want to end a conversation before it even starts, just ask this question: “Are you saved?” Many today assume only conservative Christian fanatics would dare pose such a question. But this question is not one we can simply dismiss. Salvation is, in fact, a cornerstone of our Methodist tradition. In a letter to his friend Thomas Maxfield, John Wesley wrote, “You have nothing to do but to save souls... to save as many souls as you can.” So, let me ask you again—are you saved? We all have been saved by grace, but what does that really mean for us today? What is salvation?

When we hear the word “salvation,” our minds often jump to the idea of going to heaven. Do you know how to get to heaven? A teacher once asked the children in her Sunday School class, “If I sold my house and my car, and gave all my money to the church, would I get into heaven?” “NO!” the children all answered. “If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would I get into heaven?” Again, the answer was “NO!” “Well,” she continued, “then how can I get to heaven?” In the back of the room, a five-year-old boy shouted out, “You gotta be dead!”

This joke is humorous, but it also reflects a common belief that salvation is merely about going to heaven after we die. However, salvation is not solely about the afterlife; it’s also deeply connected to our present experience.

From Death...

The Apostle Paul addresses this very issue of salvation in today’s reading. In the joke, the little boy said, “you gotta be dead to get into heaven,” but Paul wrote to the Ephesians that they were already dead through their trespasses and sins. Paul explained that before the Ephesians believed in Jesus, they followed the “ways of the world” and the “ruler of the power of the air.” Paul describes this as a “dead life.”

He goes on to say, “All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, doing the will of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else” (3). The phrase “passions of our flesh” might sound like it refers to lust or immoral behavior, but Paul’s concept is broader. Our desires are often shaped by the society in which we live. Jacques Lacan, a prominent French psychoanalyst, introduced the idea that “we desire the desire of the Other,” meaning our desires are influenced by what others want or value.

Imagine you’ve just moved to Rhode Island. You notice everyone drinking the famous Rhode Island coffee milk. You never knew such a thing existed, and you weren’t initially interested. But because everyone else seems to want it and enjoy it, you start wanting it too. It’s not just the coffee milk you desire; but also the idea that having a cup of coffee milk makes you feel like you’re part of something that others value. (By the way, Korea also has coffee milk, so one day, we can compare which tastes better!) This is a simple example, but it shows how easily our desires are shaped by others. We crave success, love, money, or approval because we see others striving for them.

The Ephesians experienced something similar. Ephesus was like the New York City of the ancient world—a major hub for religion, culture, power, and wealth. To be successful in Ephesus meant being part of the world’s elite. The people there took great pride in their city, culture, and way of life, but their desires and lives were still driven by not by God but the Roman spirit of the age. Paul said, “You let the world, which doesn’t know the first thing about living, tell you how to live.” He called this a “dead life.”

We too must reflect on whether the spirit of our times or the Spirit of America is truly healthy. Is it healthy to cling to the belief that owning military-grade weapons like assault rifles is a right, just because it's in the Constitution, while 50,000 people die from gun violence every year? Is it healthy to let profit be the sole goal of economic activity, even if it means treating people like tools and normalizing unethical behavior for the sake of money? When we watch TV, should we accept that only young, able-bodied people are portrayed as beautiful? It's time to reconsider if the American Dream, with its focus on economic success, upward mobility, and self-reliance, is truly a healthy ideal for our time. If we don’t wrestle with these questions, we might find ourselves living what the Apostle Paul called a “dead life,” despite all our hard work.

To Life

The good news is that “immense in mercy and with an incredible love, God embraced us. God took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ.” The Ephesians became free from the Roman spirit of the age that drove them to live for self-aggrandizement and achievement for honor. Instead, they learned to live by God’s grace and love through Jesus Christ. In Christ, they saw the world differently and completely changed the direction of their lives. Paul described this transformation as being made alive together with Christ. In other words, “by grace you have been saved.” We are saved from our sins, and now we are saved for the holy work of offering God’s grace to others.

Their way of seeing and living in the world changed. Their values and life purpose changed, and that transformation had a ripple effect on the world. For example, charity in the Roman world was vastly different from our modern concept of charitable giving. If someone today left a large endowment to a children’s hospital for poor families, we would value their philanthropic action and love. But in ancient Rome, such actions were not typically valued because Romans prioritized family wealth, status, and legacy. An act of charity that harmed the family’s financial standing could be seen as irresponsible or even foolish. However, as Christianity spread, people began to emphasize love for neighbors and care for the poor, and the concept of charity as we know it began to develop and change the world.

Salvation means living by new rules—the rules of God’s grace and love revealed in Jesus Christ on the cross. Love has the power to help us see people and things beyond their practical value. I recently watched a YouTube video where a man spent a significant amount of money to take his sister on a trip to visit *La Sagrada Família*, also known as the Gaudí Cathedral in Barcelona. At first glance, going on a trip with your sister might not seem particularly remarkable. But what touched me deeply was that his sister is blind. She worked as an architect in her younger years but she lost her sight due to health issues. Her brother knew that she had always wanted to visit the Gaudí Cathedral, and he decided to take her there.

Now, think about this from a practical perspective: visiting a cathedral famous for its mosaics, ornate decorations, and brilliant light with someone who can’t even see—doesn’t that seem a bit foolish? Why spend all that money and energy on a trip when she can’t experience it visually? But love has a way of revealing something far more valuable than money. As they walked through the cathedral, the brother described everything he saw to his sister, and she responded with how she felt hearing his words. Through her brother’s love, she would have been able to experience the divine light that filled the Gaudí Cathedral. Watching this, I caught a glimpse of the salvation we can experience when we live according to the values of love that Jesus has shown us.

It’s not money that saves us—it’s love. It’s not violence that saves us—it’s love. It’s not hatred that redeems humanity—it’s forgiveness. It’s not power that saves us—it’s self-giving love that saves us. We learned this truth through Jesus Christ, and when we live out what we believe, we are already living in salvation and tasting its blessings every day.

My beloved Asbury family, we are saved by God’s grace. We have been made alive in Christ. So, let us embrace this salvation with joy, knowing that as we walk in love, we are already living in the kingdom of God, right here and right now. Let’s walk in that love, bringing God’s light to the world around us. Amen.