

God's Rich Mercy & Great Love

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thomas Lynch is now a pretty well known author and poet, but if you talk to anyone from the small town of Milford, Michigan, they will tell you they know exactly who Tom Lynch is. He is the funeral director who runs Lynch and Sons Funeral Home in Milford. In writing about his work, Lynch has often noted something pretty obvious: When you deal with dead people, you really have to do everything for them. The dead just cannot do for themselves. Well, in a much-loved passage in Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul notes that there is spiritual deadness, too, and that is what we all were once upon a time. We were dead.

Today on *Groundwork*, as we wrap up our bad news/good news series in which we have been looking at passages that take a dramatic turn following the little conjunction, *but*, we will see how Paul moves us from the paralysis of being spiritually dead to something most glorious indeed. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are wrapping up this five-part series today, Dave, in which we have called it the good news/bad news, or some texts were bad news/good news, but the little conjunction, *but* reversed things and brought about a new revelation, a new truth; and today we are looking at Ephesians. We are going to look at Ephesians 2, but Ephesians is a very well-known letter of Paul.

DAVE BAST

Yes; one of the great gems of the New Testament; one of the masterpieces of style as well. It is written in quite complicated but beautiful Greek by the apostle. It really plumbs the depth, I think, of the truth of God's purpose for the world and how he has brought that about in Christ, and it is a great letter full of grace. It magnifies the grace of God, really.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul talks about our election in Christ in the first chapter, through the resurrection of the dead. Chapter 3 has that beautiful prayer for the Ephesians: I kneel before the Father – a beautiful, moving prayer that Paul offers on behalf of all believers. Chapter 4 talks about how we live now as children of the light; and then the whole book concludes with the very famous image of putting on the full armor...

DAVE BAST

The armor of God, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the armor of our faith. We are going to zero in this program, though, on the second chapter, and the first – really, we will look at ten verses – and we will see where the bad news/good news – and it is in that order in this passage – comes in. So, let's hear these words from Ephesians Chapter 2:

¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins, ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world; following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and

senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

DAVE BAST

And here it comes: ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). ⁶And raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. ⁷So that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing; it is the gift of God. ⁹Not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.
Now that is a scripture passage right there. That is a big one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It does not get much better than that. It captures the Gospel: *euaggelion/evangelion* in the Greek, where we get our word evangelism. It means good news, and it does not get much better than that. But, in history – and right up until this present age – there are those people in the world who would not find this passage to be all that good news; partly because they do not want to accept the part that comes after the *but*, because they do not want to accept what comes *before* it; which is the bad news that we are going to talk about in this program, about what it means to be in trouble. You have to know you are in trouble to welcome the solution to the problem, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you do not think you need saving, then you do not think you need a savior, and it does not matter; you can stand on your head, you can talk fast, you can sing *Amazing Grace* – and some people are going to be unmoved by it because they just do not buy the premise that you need a savior in the first place.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is exactly right; I mean, the Good News, which is what the word Gospel means, is not good news to most people because they do not sense any need for it. It is kind of like: Oh, yeah? Oh, really? Nobody told me that I needed saving. Or, I simply do not believe it. In one sense, this is why so many of the great teachers of the Church have stressed the need for the Law of God to be explained and to be sort of borne witness to before you get to the Gospel, because otherwise people will simply dismiss what you say as irrelevant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I remember a friend of mine used to drive on his way to work for a long time past a billboard – a very well-meaning billboard, of course – that said: Jesus is the answer. And my friend always said, “But most people want to say, ‘What was the question? What do you mean, he’s the answer? What was the question?’” Tell some people Jesus is your savior and they will say, “Saved from what, exactly?” So, you have to know the bad news before the good news makes any sense to you at all.

DAVE BAST

This is an analogy, I guess, that we have used before on *Groundwork*, but it still is an apt one. I mean, you can imagine yourself sitting at home one evening, you are watching TV and you are relaxed, and all of a sudden there is a ring on the door and you go to the door and it is the plumber, who says: Here I am. And you say: Why? I didn’t call any plumber. What are you doing here?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; get off my porch. I am watching a good football game here. But then, imagine that the plumber says: The city waterworks has equipment that monitors water flow, and we are pretty sure that a water main has

broken and your basement is filling up with water even as we stand here talking. Suppose then that you quick ran to the top of the steps that lead to the basement, opened the door, flipped on the light, and sure enough, there are some of your kids old toys floating by; and now, all of a sudden you are going to grab the plumber by the lapel and say: Get in here and help me fix this problem. I did not know I had a problem, but now that I do, boy am I glad to see you. And that is sort of Paul's point in Ephesians 2. If you do not know you have the problem, you are not going to welcome the solution; but if you can accept the premise of the problem, boy, are you eager for the good news.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and the problem as he describes it here is that we are dead. We are spiritually dead. As you said, Scott, at the top of the program in the introduction, when you are dead, you cannot do anything, really. You are just absolutely helpless in every conceivable way. You can do nothing. So, again, this runs contrary to the grain of most people's conventional wisdom image, which is: Well, you take the first step; you reach out to God and he will reach out to you. All you need to do is just lift a prayer and he is right there. Somebody who is dead cannot do any of that. Now, it is a metaphor. It is a figure of speech, and it refers to the fact that, I think, in the New Testament terms, we are absolutely helpless when it comes to saving ourselves. There is nothing we... we cannot make the first step because we are incapable of it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul has more to say about that in the passage we just read in Ephesians 2. The trouble actually... it is hard to imagine the trouble can get a little worse than being told you are dead, but it does get a little bit worse, and we will consider a few of Paul's other words in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are looking today, on this bad news/good news series, at Ephesians 2; and we said that right off the bat as we read it in the first segment in Ephesians 2 Paul has one very simple thing to say to the Ephesians: You were dead! And the dead cannot do for themselves; so if something was going to happen to make us – spiritually, now – Paul is talking about spirituality – alive, it was going to have to come one hundred percent from God's side of things.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and so, that is an image of our helplessness, our spiritual inability to save ourselves, but it goes deeper than that in a way because Paul also says that while we are dead, we are also alive. He mentions that we were living in a certain way under the power of the prince of the air – words to that effect. In other words, we are the living dead, and we are under a sort of bondage to evil spiritual powers or an evil spiritual power – the Devil, not to put too fine a point on it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what that means, and what it meant for the Ephesians who lived in a very secular city with a lot of cults and paganism and riotous living going on – so, Paul says: You were dead in your sins in which you lived. Dead – lived – how does that go together? So, what that means is, you can be spiritually dead and have no idea.

DAVE BAST

Well, a little bit later in this same second chapter of Ephesians, Paul will use the phrase speaking of the primarily gentile church that he is addressing: You were without God and without hope in the world. That to me is a synonym for this spiritual death that he is talking about here in the first verses of the chapter; and I actually think this can be a point of contact between the Gospel and our secular culture, that deep down so

many people have a sense of alienation, a sense of hopelessness, maybe; a sense of helplessness in the power of forces or addictions, maybe, that are stronger than they; a sense that, no, they do not know God. There is something radically wrong.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, or loneliness can be maybe one of the first symptoms you realize that no matter how – you might be the life of the party, but if you are deep down lonely, it is a sign of your spiritual deadness. I think of that movie that came out a few years ago about Mark Zuckerberg, who invented Facebook; and it was a very, very clever film because... So, Facebook, of course, is all your friends, and it made *friending* a verb. I can friend you now on Facebook; but at the end of the movie there was this scene in which he was just sitting all alone. So, he invented this multibillion-dollar Facebook for friends and he had no friends at that time; and the last scene is him sitting alone at his computer in the glow of the screen. You can be fabulously rich and utterly dead on the inside; utterly lonely; you can invent something for your friends and have no friends, actually; and that is the paradox of the Christian life – and, worse yet, as you said, Dave, there seems to be a spiritual power – some ruler of the kingdom of the air Paul talks about – so we are under somebody else's thumb, and it is not a good somebody; and worse yet...

DAVE BAST

Yes, there is one more piece of bad news.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It makes us children of wrath or objects of wrath.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; that is coming, too. So, as if it is not bad enough to be dead spiritually, and to be in bondage to the power of evil and the personality behind all of that power, the worst of it all is that there is such a thing as the wrath of God, and we, in Paul's words, are children of wrath; meaning this is what we can look forward to inheriting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Someday there is going to be a reckoning for this, and those who are spiritually dead will become eternally dead and cut off from God by his just and righteous judgment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we said in the first segment of this program, Dave, that some people resist the bad news that there is such a thing as sin at all, but now if you want to talk about something that a lot of people, even some Christian people, really resist, talk about the wrath of God. You know, one of the most popular hymns that has been written in the last 10 to 15 years, that has been a sensation around the world is Keith Getty's *In Christ Alone*, but that hymn has become very controversial and has been deleted from a number of hymnals in the last year or two because there is a line in there that when Christ died on the cross the wrath of God was satisfied, and there are a lot of people, even in the Church, who do not want wrath talk. God is a nice God; he is a kind deity; he cannot be wrathful; and so, people really resist this part of the bad news that Paul is talking about in Ephesians 2.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and the problem with that is – I mean, I do not like thinking about this either...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, nobody does.

DAVE BAST

If you remove wrath from the character of God, you have to take an awful lot of the Bible away, and you also, in doing so – it is like a surgical operation that takes too much – it takes too much with it, because you are removing the moral component of God. Imagine what the world would be like if God were not filled with wrath against the terrible things that happen? The terrible things that people have done and continue to do. If God were indifferent to that If he just did not care. I often think of the story of David and Bathsheba, and without getting into the whole story, maybe most people will remember that, how David took this other man's wife and then killed him – had him killed. And the last line in that story is: But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. If God were not like that – if things like that did not displease him, imagine the world as it would be. So, no; wrath is absolutely crucial to the character of a holy God. Our problem is, we think of it as anger – as him flying off the handle – but it is not that. There is no passion in God like that. It is simply his determination to be right and righteous.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we have pointed out on other programs and other series' on *Groundwork*, Dave, anger and wrath are never God's primary traits. It is always love; and that comes through also in this passage. So, people will say: Oh, I do not want to think of God as being wrathful. I thought he was kind and gracious and good; and Paul says: Yes, he is. In fact, so kind and gracious and good, that while we were yet sinners, while we were dead, following the ruler of the air – the Devil himself – while we were objects of wrath, God nevertheless found it in himself to love us and take us dead people and make us alive in Jesus Christ, as only God could do, because we could not take the first step, we were dead.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, God is kind. He is loving above all...

DAVE BAST

Or as Paul says here, 'He is rich in mercy,' and that is the phrase we want to focus on as we talk about the good news in our last segment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and this is the final program, Dave, of our bad news/good news series, and we have been focusing on Ephesians 2, and how Paul, for the first several verses in Ephesians 2 just kind of hammers away at humanity, and says to the Ephesians: Look, you – once upon a time not long ago – you were dead as a doornail – dead, dead, dead. You could not do a thing for yourself. You were following the wrong spiritual force in the world. You were objects of God's wrath. All things being equal, God had every right to be angry at how you were living and vandalizing the shalom of his creation; but, God is rich in mercy and he is kind, and so he made you alive anyway through the sheer gift of grace through Jesus Christ. It is all God.

DAVE BAST

And it is the work, specifically, of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who quickens us, or regenerates us, is I guess the theological term. Incidentally, somebody once asked John Wesley why he preached so often on the text from John 3: You must be born again – you know, Jesus' words to Nicodemus – and Wesley said: Because you must be born again. This is what we mean when we talk about "born again" Christians. Actually, that is a little bit of a misnomer; you know, to classify certain enthusiastic Christians as "born-again" Christians. There is no other kind. Anyone who is a Christian has to have been born again. That is the whole point that Paul is making here. God made you alive in Christ Jesus. That is what Paul says. That is the Good News.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think, interestingly enough, what you were just saying about being born again, and so forth, and that really burst onto the national consciousness in the United States around the time that Jimmy Carter was running for the Presidency in 1976 because he was very unabashed in proclaiming himself to be a “born-again” Christian. To a lot of people in America, who were not steeped in John 3, that was kind of like, what does that mean? We are all born again, but as we close this program now, and thinking about the wonderful Good News that we saw in Ephesians 2: But, God who is rich in mercy made you alive in Christ – we can think about some different angles on that, including, for those of us who do not have a dramatic born-again story – we do not have a before and after. We cannot say: Well, once I was a drug kingpin, but now I serve Jesus; or once I was a pornographer, but now... A lot of us do not have those stories.

DAVE BAST

Or Chuck Colson, you know, who titled his autobiography: *Born Again*. He was Nixon’s hatchet man; you know, the toughest of the tough, and completely worldly and interested only in power, and then he fell from grace, and of course, as the saying goes: He fell into grace, actually. Graciously, God claimed him for his own, and he was born again.

Well, I think one of the mistakes we make is in identifying this new birth, or this experience of grace – we could call it that, too – with a certain kind of emotional experience, or with a certain kind of dramatic personal story. It is not that, necessarily. It is not even that you can clearly see a before and after. The question is, do you have this life of God within you? I mean, I cannot... My story is typical of many who grew up in the Church. I cannot remember a time when I did not know and love Jesus from my heart; and that is how my life has gone. So, it is not so much what kind of story you have, but is the grace of God real to you? Have you experienced it? Notice how Paul links it all “in Christ Jesus; in Christ Jesus,” over and over and over, it is in, in, in. My question to somebody who might be tempted to doubt this or to say, “Well, I do not really have a great story,” is, how do you feel about Jesus? Are you drawn to him? Are you living in him? Is he your life? If so, praise God; that is God’s grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if you have that life in you; if you have been, as you said, quickened by the Holy Spirit, even if you cannot ever remember a time when you had not been quickened by the Holy Spirit – you were baptized when you were 5 weeks old – if that life is in you, it is in you for the exact same reason it was in the Ephesian Christians – you had been dead and you are now alive, and it is not because you earned it. It is not because you chipped into it. It is not because your parents did something nice for you. It is because God, who is rich in mercy, made you alive in Christ, and it does not really matter when it was. Sometimes a lot of churches today – and maybe this is true of a lot of us at some level – resist being a downer. They do not want to have negative, sin talk, and guilt talk, and “you were dead” talk because that is going to turn people off; but sometimes for those of us who maybe have been life-long Christians – we do not have a dramatic before-and-after story – we cannot ever remember feeling dead in our sins – but we should and can remember: Hey, if it were not for the Holy Spirit getting at me at some point, I would be that dead. I would be that bad off, even now.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, our gratitude then increases.

Dave Bast;

Well, that is right. That is one of the great benefits of coming to recognize this truth. These truths are sometimes called the doctrines of grace, and it is really the heart of the Reformed take on the Christian faith. You know, this great verse here that we read: Ephesians 2:8: By grace you have been saved through faith; not because of works – that is it right there in a nutshell. I have sometimes said if you can get those prepositions right, you have a pretty good grasp on the heart of the Christian faith. It is by grace – that is the whole cause

of it – it is through faith – it comes through the instrumentality of our believing in Christ – and it is for good works. We are not saved by our good works, but we are saved for them so that we will do them. Calvin says somewhere that... It can do several things for us, and one of them is it can make us humble.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

None of us is ready to claim: Hey, I did this, you know; I am better than you because I figured this out and I chose to believe in Jesus... No, no; it is all by grace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is another comfort in that, and maybe this will be our last point. Nevertheless, we do have this life in us that no one can take away. Nobody can make us dead again once God in Christ has made us alive; but we do still struggle in this life, we have temptations, we fail sometimes, and sometimes wonderful Christian people can feel kind of bad about themselves, and they worry about their salvation, and they wonder: Am I good enough, and so forth. What this passage in Ephesians tells us is: Look, the battle is not yours to win. It has been won for you. You cannot make yourself dead again.

Romans 8 – a different passage – There is nothing that can separate you; nothing, nothing in all creation – and so, when we are feeling a little down about ourselves, when we feel like we are failures, even in front of God, this verse reminds us from Ephesians, the battle is not yours to win. It was already won by Jesus, and it had to start on that side.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. Maybe we can come full circle back to the Getty hymn: *In Christ Alone*. In Christ alone; it is all in Christ. My salvation, Scott, and your salvation, and the salvation of anyone who is being saved is God's project. It is God's work more than it is ours, before it is ever ours, and it is all done in Christ. So, we give thanks for that.

And thanks to you for joining this *Groundwork* conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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