

Ephesians 2:4-7

Introduction

Last week we reminded ourselves that there are three basic ingredients in a sentence – a subject (I), a main verb (hit), and usually an object (the ball). In Ephesians 2:1-7 we have a sentence of 124 words – so where do we find these three main ingredients?

Paul starts off with the words, “And **YOU**...”. So there’s the “object” in the sentence. But then he breaks off without giving us any subject or main verb. So what’s *happened* to the Ephesians (where’s the verb)? And who has done it (where’s the subject)? We’ll have to wait a while for any answers to these questions. But in the meantime Paul spends a lot of time on the object – which is first of all the Ephesians, and then it widens out to include Paul along with all of God’s people everywhere.

And **YOU**—

being dead in **your** trespasses and sins
in which **you** once walked,
according to the age of this world,
according to the ruler of the authority of the air,
of the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience,
among whom **we all** also once lived in the passions of **our** flesh,
carrying out the desires of the flesh and of the mind,
and were by nature children of wrath
even as the rest;

Paul could not have painted a more hopeless or a more impossible picture. We were spiritually *dead*. Because of our sin, we were cut off from God – who is the source of true life. But being cut off from God, it was *impossible* for us to walk in anything other than our trespasses and sins. We were walking according to the age of this world. Instead of being concerned with eternal values or with the judgment to come, we went along with what was fashionable and acceptable and were concerned only with the activities and values of this present age. We were slaves to the power and influence of the age of this world, and so it was *impossible* for us to set our minds on the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1-4). If the world was the ocean, then we were fish swimming in the ocean. We had no thoughts for any life above the surface of the water. We were immersed in the world and carried along by its currents. We could not escape because like fish in the sea, we didn’t want to escape. We were walking according to the ruler of the authority of the air. We were entirely subject to Satan’s will, though our minds were blinded so that we couldn’t see it. We were deceived by his lies (who is the father of lies; John 8:44), and yet it was *impossible* for us to be undeceived because we had no will to believe the truth (2 Thess. 2:9-12). We all once lived among the sons of disobedience. All of our disobedience flowed from our ultimate disobedience of refusing to believe and trust in God’s free provision of salvation and the forgiveness of sins (2 Thess. 2:10-11).

✓ John 6:28-29 — Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

All works that don't flow from this belief in God's infinite provision of salvation *can only be* works of disobedience. And so *all* that we did was disobedience. Our entire life was characterized by disobedience. Even our "good deeds" were simply the evidence of our refusal to believe and love the truth about God's gracious provision of salvation. And so there could be absolutely ***no hope*** that we would ever change. We lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and of the mind. We ***wanted*** to pursue our own pleasure and happiness in this world which lies under the dominion of Satan. We ***wanted*** to pursue our own pleasure and happiness independently of God. We ***wanted*** to be our own gods – to set our own standards of "right" and "wrong," to be the center around which all of our thoughts revolved. We walked according to the age of this world, and according to the ruler of the authority of the air not because we were held against our will, but because this was what we ***wanted***. We weren't just in slavery to Satan and the world around us, but to the ***desires*** within our own hearts. It was ***impossible*** to escape from these desires because they were what we truly ***wanted*** most of all. We couldn't escape from ourselves. We were by nature children of wrath even as the rest. "God does not condemn the innocent" (Calvin). But if *we* were *all* children of wrath, what must this say about our sin and our guilt? "By nature" means "by birth." There was **never** any possibility or hope that we would choose any other way.

✓ Romans 5:12 — Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to *all men*, because *all sinned*.

"Our condition, therefore... may well excite our horror" (Calvin). Paul could not have painted a more hopeless or a more impossible picture. But that was us. That was every single one of us. And so now Paul is ready for the subject of his sentence.

I. "but God"

Here is the whole Gospel in two words. Into this hopeless, impossible equation comes the God for whom *nothing* can be impossible. Into this hopeless, impossible equation comes the God who can accomplish *all* things.

If there was no "but," we'd ***naturally*** assume that Paul was introducing God as the agent of wrath and judgment and destruction. "***BUT... God***" Those *two* words are the sweetest music that our souls could ever want to hear.

II. "but God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us"

So we have the object of the sentence (that's us) and now the subject of the sentence (that's God), but we still don't have any main verb. Paul's still not ready. We still don't know *exactly* *what it is* that God has done to us, or with us, or for us. First, Paul has something he wants to say about God Himself.

Whatever it is that God has done, it's because He is so *rich in mercy* – because of His *great love with which He loved us*. Paul is not content to say that God is merciful, *or* that He is loving. He is

merciful *and* loving. But that's still not good enough: He is *rich* in mercy and His love is *great* – His love *with which He loved us*.

“Mercy” and “love” are synonyms here – they aren’t meant to be given separate definitions. The point is that when it comes to the great theme of our salvation, Paul’s goal is never to use one word where two will do – or even two or three words where five or six will do. So often we can think of mercy purely in its modern legal sense of *not* giving us what we *do* deserve. But in the Scriptures, we can only draw this meaning from the surrounding context and not from the word itself. From the context here in Ephesians, it’s obviously true that God’s mercy is undeserved. But the point of this mercy is not so much the punishment He doesn’t give us as the tender compassions that He does give us. This explains how Paul can say that God is *rich* in mercy. Or we could think of God’s *many* mercies to us. The people who translated the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek used this same Greek word for mercy to translate a Hebrew word that means “lovingkindness” or “steadfast love.”

- ✓ Isaiah 63:7 — I will recount the *steadfast love* of the LORD, the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has granted us, and the *great goodness* to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his *compassion*, according to the abundance of his *steadfast love*.
- ✓ Ruth 1:8 — Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal *kindly* with you.”

These Greek translators also used this same word for “mercy” to translate other Hebrew words that mean compassion and favor.

- ✓ Isaiah 54:7 — For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great *compassion* I will gather you.
- ✓ Isaiah 60:10 — In my wrath I struck you, but in my *favor* I have had [*compassion*] on you.
- ✓ Isaiah 63:15 — Where are your zeal and your might? *The stirring of your inner parts* and your compassion are held back from me.
- ✓ Cf. Psalm 90:14; 106:7; 141:5; Psalm 109:16; Psalm 63:3

God’s mercy is His wonderful kindness, and tenderness, and compassion, and love. God’s mercy is the stirring of His inner parts toward us. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us...” Now are we ready for the main verb? Not yet.

III. “even when we were dead in our trespasses”

You see, *this... this* is what *astonishes* Paul. Just in case we’ve forgotten all that he just said in verses 1-3 about how utterly hopeless was our condition, Paul picks up the phrase from verse 1 and repeats it here in verse 5. “And you, being dead in your trespasses and sins... But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses...” (cf. Rom. 5:6, 8, 10). Now are we ready for the main verb? Now are we ready to hear exactly what it is that God has done to us, or with us, or for us?

IV. “But God... made us alive together with Christ (by grace you are saved!), and raised us up together with Him, and seated us together with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”

It’s not one main verb, but three! And yet after the first main verb, Paul interrupts himself *again* (for the third time). He just breaks out with a pure exclamation of praise and amazement: “**by grace you are saved!** If we who were dead in trespasses and sins have been made alive because of God’s rich mercy and great love, then it’s *by grace* not just that we *were* saved but that we *are saved even now*. Paul is not marveling at this grace in the past tense. He’s marveling at this grace in the perfect tense. It’s a grace that we have received, and are receiving, and will go on receiving for time without end. We’ll see this even more wonderfully and clearly in verse seven. This grace comes to us without ever ceasing, and so it comes to us without ever ceasing for one moment to be wholly undeserved. By grace you **are** saved!

And now what about those main verbs? What about what God has done? I’ve translated these verses with 31 words, but the Greek has only 16 words. Let me show you why.

But God...	//	made us alive together with	//	Christ
	//	synezoopoiesen	//	
and	//	raised us up together with	//	[Him]
	//	synegeiren	//	
and	//	seated us together with	//	[Him]
	//	synekathisen	//	

It takes us fourteen words just to translate Paul’s three main verbs. These are what we call compound verbs because they’re all made up of a verb (God made us alive, raised us up, and seated us) *plus* a preposition. You can see it there in the bolded letters. See how the same preposition is added to all three verbs: “Syn... syn... syn... together with... together with... together with...” In fact, Paul is apparently the one who invented the first word just for this occasion, adding “syn” to “zoopoieo” to create his own word meaning “make us alive together with.” And so if we were reading the Greek, almost before we noticed the main verbs we’d notice the repeated preposition, “syn.” “God made us alive **together with Christ** and raised us up **together with Him** and seated us **together with Him**.” And as I lay in bed last week meditating on these words, all I could think was that He is my “everything.” He is our all. He is our salvation from start to finish and everything in the middle – from beginning to end and everything in between. All that we are now and all that we can ever hope to be is all because of Him – and not just because of what He has done, but because we have been **joined together with Him**. You could almost say that the preposition *is* the main verb. What has God done? He has **joined us together with** Christ. And He has done this so thoroughly, and so perfectly, and so completely that Paul can even say this: God has **made us alive** together with Christ and **raised us up** together with Him and **seated us** together with Him in the heavenly places.

We’re already sharing in Christ’s resurrection life even before the resurrection of our bodies (cf. John 5:24). It *has* to be this way, because we’ve already been **joined together with Him**. That’s why Paul can even say that we’ve already been resurrected from the dead. God made us alive together with Christ **and raised us up together with Him**. This spiritual resurrection that we’ve

already experienced is the guarantee that one day our bodies will also follow in the pattern of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:11). It *has* to be this way, because we've already been *joined together with Him*.

We were dead in our trespasses and sins, Paul says, but it was ***when*** we were dead in our trespasses that ***God made us alive*** together with Christ and raised us up together with Him. I think of the song that we sing: "I was blinded by my sin, had no ears to hear Your voice, did not know Your love within, had no taste for heaven's joys. Then Your Spirit gave me life, opened up Your Word to me, through the gospel of Your Son gave me endless hope and peace." (Bob Kauflin) And so we walk now, as Paul says, in newness of life – in the newness of Christ's own resurrection life (cf. Rom. 6:4) – no longer according to the age of this world, no longer as sons of disobedience, no longer as children of wrath. And so Paul would say to us:

- ✓ Colossians 3:1–2 — If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Paul has just spoken of the "powerful working of the strength of [God's] might that He powerfully worked in Christ ***when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places***, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named... and He put all things under His feet." (Ephesians 1:19-22). Now Paul says that God has raised us up together with Christ and seated us together with Him in the heavenly places. So what does that mean? It means that we share not only in His resurrection life, but in His power and authority over sin and death, and over Satan with all his forces of evil. We were walking according to the age of this world, according to the ruler of the authority of the air, but then, in the very midst of our slavery and rebellion, God raised us up together with Christ and seated us together with Him in the heavenly places. We now share in Christ's royal *authority* over the very one to whom we were once hopelessly enslaved.*

What a transformation! What a miracle of saving grace! We no longer have to succumb to the evil one's designs (O'Brien). Now we can do battle with the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places having put on the whole armor of God, and we can know that we will withstand

* Consider the significance of this truth for that time after our souls have gone to be with Jesus in person. What impact should this have on how we understand the "timing" of the saints' reign with Jesus for a "thousand years"? Revelation 3:21 — The one who conquers [stays faithful until death], I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and [have already] sat down with my Father on his throne. Revelation 2:26–27 — The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end [until death], to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have [already] received [this] authority from my Father. Revelation 20:4–6 — Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands [those who had conquered and stayed faithful until death]. They came to life [they lived even after their death] and reigned with Christ for a thousand years [a thousand years is symbolic of the time that the saints are reigning in this age]. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection [spiritual resurrection]. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death [spiritual death] has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

in the evil day, and having done all, we will stand and have the victory, and Satan himself will be crushed under our feet (cf. Eph. 6:12-13; Rom. 16:20). So complete has been the victory of Christ that now even our martyrdom at the cruel hands of Satan is just the path to our final triumph.

- ✓ Revelation 12:11 — And they have *conquered* [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, *for they loved not their lives even unto death*.

We have been *so* totally, and completely, and even radically transformed! While there *is* a gradual process in the Christian life, the change from death to life was an instantaneous, miraculous conversion and transformation by God's powerful saving grace. We are God's *new creation* "in Christ Jesus" (cf. Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17). And dare we ask *why* God has done all of this for us? Paul answers:

V. "so that He might show in the coming ages the exceeding riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

Part of me feels like it's sacrilege to say anything more. So I'll ask only very briefly: "What does Paul mean by 'the coming ages?'" And I'll answer with the words of F. F. Bruce:

"'The ages to come'... implies one age supervening on another like successive waves of the sea, as far into the future as thought can reach. Throughout time and eternity the church, this society of pardoned rebels, is designed by God to be the masterpiece of his goodness" – "so that He might show in the coming ages the exceeding riches of *His grace* in kindness *toward us* in Christ Jesus."

Conclusion

Everything started with those two words, "*but God*."

"But God" is the whole Gospel in two words precisely because there's no mention of us, or of anything we have done. We already know everything there is to know about us from the first three verses. We were dead in sin, willing slaves to the world and to Satan, sons and daughters of disobedience, slaves of our own passions and desires, and by nature children of God's wrath. And it was *while* all of these things were still completely and fully true of each one of us that *God*... that God *what*? Thielman writes:

"Although Paul and his readers deserve God's wrath, *God has made it possible* for them to escape this otherwise inevitable destiny and to share Christ's victory over evil."

From what I know of Thielman, I don't think he means what he says. These verses are not the story of what God has made possible, but of what God has done – finished – accomplished wholly and completely, once for all. There are many Christians who teach an intermediate place that stands just between our being "dead in sins" and our being "made alive together with Christ." This intermediate place is brought about by something that we've called God's "prevenient grace" – or God's preparatory grace. You may not have called it by this name, but

it's very possible you've believed it at one time or another. God's prevenient (preparatory) grace is something He is said to give to *all* human beings in order to bring them *far enough* out of this death that Paul has described and far enough out of this willing bondage to the world, and Satan, and their own sinful desires – *far enough* so that they *might* be saved *if they* will just *decide*.

But one looks in vain in these verses for any “prevenient grace.” These verses are not the story of how God made our salvation *possible* if only *we* might *decide* to reach out and take it. These verses are the story of how God *accomplished* our salvation by making us alive together with Christ, and raising us up together with Him, and seating us together with Him in the heavenly places **precisely when**—“*even when*”—we were utterly dead in our sins, and in willing bondage to the world, and to Satan, and to our own sinful passions and desires, and *by our very nature* destined only for God's wrath. It's only when we understand this (rejecting all of our ideas about prevenient grace and human ability) that we can fully understand how rich in mercy God is, and how great is His love with which He has loved us, and how lavish are the exceeding riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. That's *why* Paul just had to say it again: “**But GOD... *even when*.**”

And **YOU**—

being dead in your trespasses and sins
in which you once walked,
according to the age of this world,
according to the ruler of the authority of the air,
of the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience,
among whom we all also once lived in the passions of our flesh,
carrying out 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 trespasses,

—**MADE** us **ALIVE** *together with Christ*

(by grace you are saved)

and **RAISED** us **UP** *together with Him*

and **SEATED** us *together with him*

in the heavenly places

in Christ Jesus

so that He might show in the coming ages the exceeding riches of his grace

in kindness toward us

in Christ Jesus.