

Dead . . . But God

Easter

Ephesians 2:1-8

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

God saved us, not on the basis of anything we have to offer Him, but as the expression of His mercy, love, grace and kindness.

Discussion Points:

Stephen mentioned some characteristics of the spiritually dead: they have no communication with God; the Bible is closed to them; the Spirit of God doesn't impress their hearts and God does not give them wisdom or direction.

- Think back to before God saved you. In what ways did your life reflect these characteristics?
- In what ways did your life reflect spiritual deadness?

A critical truth from this passage is that you did not contribute to your salvation.

- Did it surprise you to learn that 77% of people think they're better than most people? Why is it difficult for most unsaved people to admit their sin and their need for God?
- In what ways are you tempted to think that you partner with God in your salvation or in your standing before God?
- What does the Bible say is your contribution to your salvation?

Stephen pointed out that the gospel tries to convince you that you are dead, not simply that you are bad.

- What are the implications to that truth?
- What is significant about being spiritually dead as opposed to being a bad person?

In this passage, four of God's attributes are on display in our salvation.

- *God is rich in mercy.* What are the implications for your life that God does not give you what you deserve? What do you deserve?
- *God demonstrates great love.* Why is it important that God didn't love you because of what he saw in you but in spite of what He saw in you?
- *God treats us with grace.* In what ways is salvation receiving from God what you don't deserve?
- *God is kind.* What are some practical ways God has demonstrated His kindness toward you?

Discussion Guide cont.

Gospel Connection:

This message is a gospel presentation. You were dead in your sins, and destined for God's eternal wrath. But God saved you on the basis of his mercy, love, grace and kindness.

Practical Implications:

Think: If you have not placed your faith in Jesus Christ, this is a good time to reflect on your need of salvation and consider the Bible's claims. We have some additional information about the gospel on our website. Visit www.colonial.org and look under the "About" tab.

If you are a Christian, consider how God's attributes are necessary for you every day. What are some ways you need and rely on God's mercy, love, grace and kindness every day?

Pray: Thank God for the salvation He brought you when you were unworthy to receive it.

Respond: To remember this lesson, take Stephen's advice and mark the key phrases in your Bible. In verse 1, circle the words "you were dead" and draw a line to the words "but God" in verse 4. Circle that, then draw a line to the words "made us alive" in verse 5 and circle those. Take time to reflect on this passage, and especially the words "but God." Make a list of things that would be true of you were it not for God.

If you have a hymn book, find and sing the hymn *At Calvary*.

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Imagine the inconvenience and even the awfulness of being declared dead by the United States Government. Consider this true story. In August of 2010, communications specialist Judy Rivers went to her local bank to open a new account. As the clerk input Rivers' personal information, everything seemed to be going smoothly, but then the woman behind the desk stopped abruptly and frowned.

"That's odd," she said. "There seems to be an issue regarding your Social Security number." With a skeptical glance, the employee rose and disappeared in the back room; several minutes later, Judy was greeted by the branch manager who said to her, "Ma'am, 24 months ago your Social Security number was deactivated in due to your death."

Judy rose from her chair and laughingly said, "You mean I've been dead for two years and no one bothered to tell me?" "I'm afraid so", the banker replied.

The article went on to conclude, "Judy Rivers' plight as a categorized deceased person is not unusual: every year, some 12,000 U.S. citizens are declared dead by the government . . . all because of some employee at the Social Security Administration made what they call, "a keystroke error."

Those affected become like the walking dead, unable to secure a job, make financial transactions, file taxes, receive medical treatment . . . and for months on end, they must endure the nightmare of convincing the government that they are still alive.ⁱ

Imagine making the unsettling discovery that as far as the government was concerned – you are deceased?

Somebody in the bureaucracy made a mistake, hit the wrong key on the keyboard, and you're records were closed and you were henceforth considered officially dead. And you know it's just not true . . . you're still breathing . . . paying the bills and cutting the grass.

However, as I read that news article, I couldn't help but think – and has it ever occurred to you, that according to the government of a sovereign God –

our world is filled with people who are, at this very moment, dead.

Apart from the intervention of the gospel, God has declared us all – officially, spiritually dead.

We're not only dead, spiritually – but we're heading for a judgment of eternal death and separation. And this declaration isn't the result of a keystroke error . . . it happens to be the truth.

Let me show you where. ***Turn to Ephesians chapter 2***, where the Spirit of God delivers to us the unsettling news of our status before God.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesian believers, he announces their former status . . . and the need for a resurrected Savior.

Paul writes in ***verse 1, And you were dead . . . literally, and you, being dead, in your trespasses and sins.***

Paul delivers, what one author calls a withering diagnosis. The unbeliever doesn't need resuscitation, he needs a personal resurrection.ⁱⁱ He isn't just sick . . . he isn't just bad . . . he's dead.

And here are the symptoms: people who are spiritually dead have no communication with God; the Bible is a closed book; the Spirit of God doesn't impress their hearts or give them wisdom or direction; they are unresponsive to spiritual matters . . . they are spiritually flat-lined.

Keep in mind that Paul isn't describing some cannibalistic tribe in the Amazon; he isn't pointing a finger at the drug addict or sex trafficker or embezzler or murderer . . . he's delivering this divine diagnosis directly from the Great Physician and Creator of mankind.

"All lost sinners are dead" – the good looking, the good living, the good standing – Paul is writing to bankrupt man as he is to the man with a million dollars stashed in bank accounts.ⁱⁱⁱ

Because of sin . . . we're all dead. And here's the evidence . . . before Christ saved you, ***verse 2 you 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. 3. Among them we too all formerly***

lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind.

Paul is painting the human race with the worst of colors, isn't he? And maybe you're thinking . . . yea, but that's not me.

Perhaps you're here today under the impression that you're not as bad as other people – certainly those kinds of people described here.

That's a very natural reaction I hear over and over again when I talk to people about the gospel – "I'm not that bad . . . and I'm certainly not spiritually dead."

Some time ago I came across the results of a survey, taken by the Josephson Institute, a Los-Angeles-based ethics institute. It conducted a character survey of nearly 20,000 students from 100 randomly selected schools nationwide. The findings included:

- 64% admitted that they'd cheated on a test in the past year
- 30% admitted to stealing
- 42% said that they would definitely lie if it brought financial gain
- 83% said they'd lied about something to their parents in the past year

Despite these admissions, 93% said they were satisfied with their personal character and ethical standards and 77% added the comment, "I am better than most people I know."

They're admittedly guilty of lying, stealing, cheating and selling out for financial gain – but they keep a straight face and come to the conclusion, "But I am better than other people I know."

Listen to Paul and the declaration of the gospel regarding our status. The gospel through the Apostle Paul says you're dead in your trespasses and sins; but would you notice that he doesn't say here in verse 1 that you're a worse sinner than others; he doesn't even say here that you're bad . . . he just says, you're dead.

He doesn't say you're sick; or guilty of making a few wrong choices; or having a bad day . . . you're dead.

Spiritually dead and unresponsive to spiritual things and unrelated to the family of God. That's your status, apart from Christ – no matter how alive you feel.

Paul puts it this way to the Roman believers when he writes, ***For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)***

There's no scale in that . . . there's no "you're better than other people so don't worry about it" . . . no, it's simply put – everyone is guilty of sin and because of that, we are all falling short of the glory of God – or, in finality, we're falling short of getting into heaven. And why? Because we're all sinners, period.

Imagine if I asked you to stand on top of your chair – I'm not literally asking that, so stay seated – but suppose I told all of you to stand on top of your chair and then on the count of three, with one giant jump, I want you to jump from your chair to this platform. Get ready . . . one, two, three, jump!

At the end of that jump, some of you would be closer to this platform than others – some of you are just better jumpers than others; some of you are younger and stronger and more agile. Some of you are still be trying to get on top of your chair.

But in the end, every one of you would have this in common – you would all have fallen short of this platform.

So in the matter of sin and moral and ethical conduct; some people are indeed better than others; some people are more sinful than others, but the status of us all is that we are all sinful and because of that we all fall short of the glory of God, or heaven – no matter how hard you try.

Listen, that's the bad news of the gospel . . . and sometimes you need to know how bad the bad news is before you can appreciate the good news.

And Paul isn't finished delivering the bad news here. Notice the last part of ***verse 3, you were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.***

Children of wrath; Greek students understand this original construction to be a genitive of purpose or destination – in other words, we are destined to experience the wrath of God.

Now when you think of the anger or wrath of God, according to the Bible's description, it isn't a bad temper; God doesn't fly off the handle; His wrath isn't malicious or filled with animosity or even revenge. One author writes, the wrath of God is not subject to mood swings. His wrath is never arbitrary or resentful. John Stott defined the wrath of God well when he wrote, "this is God's personal, righteous, constant hostility to evil; it is His settled refusal to compromise with it, and it is His resolve instead to condemn it."^{iv}

And because we're all guilty of sin, we're all heading toward the God's settled resolve to condemn it in us.

In other words, we're not just missing Heaven, we're heading toward a personal encounter with a righteous holy God. To put it bluntly, sinners will be held accountable to God.

And that's the bad news of the gospel that turns off the unbeliever. Not only "am I not that bad as a sinner, but God can't be the kind of God who is going to hold me accountable."

One unbelieving philosopher weighed in on this subject – he's a well-known author who wrote a popular introduction to a college philosophy textbook titled, "What Does It All Mean?" He was interviewed and admitted – and I quote – I want atheism to be true. It isn't that I don't believe in God, and naturally, hope that I'm right about my belief. It's that I hope there is no God. I don't want there to be a God . . . I don't want the universe to be like that either."

In other words, if God is really out there in the universe, then a coming encounter with Him is more than likely going to happen. And I hope that doesn't happen.

Listen, the human race is racing toward that encounter. It is appointed unto man, once to die and after that the judgement (Hebrews 9:27).

Just look up the world death clock online sometime and watch it count the death rate, worldwide. Nearly three people every second are dying.

The traffic flow from earth to eternal judgment looks like rush hour . . . and many are heading toward an encounter with a God they'd rather not meet . . . they hoped He wasn't there. And they discover He is – and He is a God with a settled refusal to compromise with sin and a settled resolve to condemn it.

Let me tell you how serious He is about sin – He forsook His own Son because His Son became sin for us who knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That's how bad the bad news is – about your status . . . and the wrath of God for sin.

Which leads me to say, the next two words in this text are among the most precious. In fact, they are two of the most life changing words in all of the English text of scripture – **verse 4, But God.**

In verses 1-3, Paul has described the gospel in terms of hopelessness and depravity and death; now

Paul describes the gospel in terms of mercy and love and grace.

How? Notice – ***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.***

Don't miss it – your hope and mine is rooted in the resurrection of Christ. If Christ isn't alive, you can't be brought to life in Him! Without Christ's life – we are condemned to remain dead in trespasses and sin, separated eternally from God now, and forever.

You see, the resurrection isn't just about Jesus . . . the resurrection is about you. It's your only hope. He's the only way to eternal life.

There are three phrases in this paragraph that you ought to draw connecting lines together – they summarize the gospel in one sentence:

Verse 1 – you were dead . . . circle that and then draw a line down to ***verse 4 – But God.***

You were dead – connect that to ***But God***

Then thirdly, the phrase in the middle of ***verse 5, "made us alive"***.

You were dead . . . but God . . . made us alive.

You were dead – that's your original condition. But God made us alive – that's the new creation.

But the question remains: why would He offer life to us? Why would he offer forgiveness and eternal life to cheaters . . . liars . . . idolaters . . . to sinners all, who've fallen short of His glory and were the reason for His son's death? Why?

There are four words to circle or highlight in your text:

1. The first word is "***mercy***" – ***verse 4, But God, being rich in mercy.***

In Biblical terms, mercy is the withholding of what you deserve.

A guilty criminal before his sentencing doesn't cry out to the judge – give me justice. He deserves that. No, he cries – Give me mercy . . . withhold from me what I deserve.

Come boldly to the throne of grace that you might find mercy (Hebrews 4:16)

God isn't stingy with His storehouse of mercy . . . He's rich with it . . . anyone who asks receives it new every morning and there's enough to last throughout eternity!

2. Then secondly, circle the word *love* – *verse 5* again, ***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.***

He is rich in mercy and the dispenser of great love.

C. S. Lewis put it this way – God, who needs nothing, loves into existence creatures in order that he may love and perfect them. He creates the universe, already seeing the buzzing cloud of flies around the cross; the flayed back of His Son pressed against the cross; the nails driven through the mesial nerves, the repeated torture of back and arms as Christ raises Himself, time after time, simply to breath . . . herein is love – this is the diagram of Love Himself – the inventor of all loves.^v

He loved us – even when we were dead in our transgressions! In other words, God didn't save us because of what he sees in us, He saved us in spite of what He sees in us. That's agape love!

Circle the next word that explains how we could be given eternal life and forgiveness.

3. It's the word – *grace*. ***Verse 5, the middle part, He made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved.***

Down in *verse 8*, he expands on this by writing, ***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.***

No one gets to heaven by adding their works to God's gift. Whether it's keeping some commandment; getting baptized; joining the church; keeping your nose clean . . . no, this is a gift. And we did nothing to earn it or deserve it.

No one is going to get into heaven one day, look at Jesus and say, "We made a pretty good team . . . You did your part and I did mine."

Mercy is having something withheld from you that you deserve. Grace is having something given to you that you do not deserve.

Salvation and forgiveness is a gift that you can only receive.

4. There's one more word – often overlooked in the gospel. It's the word *kindness*.

The word *kindness* can be understood in terms of graciousness or goodness.

Paul writes here in *verse 6*. ***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.***

Just think then of the irony of the gospel. Throughout the ages to come – throughout the eons of eternity, God in His kindness plans to use us – redeemed sinners – to display as it were these attributes that would never have been displayed:

- His mercy
- His love
- His grace
- His kindness . . . to sinners

So in the end – and throughout eternity – we, the dead who were brought to life in Christ, become the trophies of these attributes of God – we will be an eternal display of God's mercy and love and grace and kindness.

Are you His today?
Is He yours?

Are you racing toward death and that final encounter of judgment and wrath? Is this sermon going to be one more piece of evidence that you wanted death instead of life?

Look, the world and your flesh and the devil are offering you promises . . . promise after promise – here's the irony – their promises are filled with emptiness. They are empty promises.

The Gospel of Christ offers emptiness filled with promise; the empty cross; the empty tomb; the empty grave-clothes – these empty things are full of eternal promise.

Are you racing toward empty promises? And a coming encounter with judgment and wrath?

Or, are you racing toward that day when God shall display you as His living, resurrection trophy of mercy and love and grace and kindness.

Some time ago, I read the account of a rebellious, rather angry unbelieving high school student. His name was William R. Newell and he went on to trust Christ and become a significant theologian and author in the 1800's.

But as a teenager, he had rejected his parent's Christianity and was filled with sarcasm toward Christ and the Bible. At his father's command though, in 1888 he applied to Moody Bible Institute, but was rejected.

At his father's personal pleading with the president of the school, R. A. Torrey, William was allowed into Moody, under 2 conditions; first, that he keep the school rules of conduct and secondly that he meet every day with Dr. Torrey in his office. William agreed.

And so every day at the prescribed time, William came into Torrey's office and offered his angry doubts and fired away with his cynical questions; and every day, Dr. Torrey patiently and kindly answered them by turning to the Word of God.

Days turned into weeks and weeks into months . . . then one day, William came into the president's office smiling, Torrey wrote in his journal, "[he came in today] as if rain had fallen on parched ground." William R. Newell had given his life to Jesus Christ.

You'll probably never read William R. Newell's commentaries – which I have in my library of

treasures, but you've probably sung a poem that he wrote as his personal testimony; it sounds a lot like this text in Ephesians chapter 2 . . . and with this I close:

Years I spent in vanity and pride,
Caring not my Lord was crucified,
Knowing not it was for me He died – On Calvary;

By God's Word at last my sin I learned;
Then I trembled at the law I'd spurned,
Till my guilty soul imploring turned – To Calvary

Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan
Oh, the grace that brought it down to man,
Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span - At Calvary!

Mercy there was great and grace was free,
Pardon there was multiplied to me,
There my burdened soul found liberty – At
Calvary.^{vi}

This happens to be the personal testimony of every person in here who was dead . . . but God . . . brought you to life by His mercy and love and grace and kindness – and into personal surrender to your resurrected, redeeming Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 04/16/2017 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Zachary Crockett, "What It's Like to Be Declared Dead by the Government," *Priceonomics* blog (6-16-15)

ii Sam Gordon, Ephesians: The Genius of Grace (Trans World Radio, 2013), p. 114

iii Adapted from Gordon, p. 113

iv Gordon, p. 119

v James Montgomery Boice, Ephesians (Baker Books, 1997), p. 100

vi Al Smith, Hymn Histories (Better Music Publications), 1985, p. 70