**Ephesians 2:1-10, “A God who is Kind to the Dead”**

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Justin Ryan Hawkins | Feb. 24, 2019

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart,*

*be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.*

*Psalm 19:14*

A few years ago, one of the most popular genres of television was the zombie genre. If you’ve ever watched a movie or show like this – The Walking Dead, World War Z, I am Legend – they’re all quite similar: there is some post-apocalyptic world in which a ragtag bunch of survivors in dirty clothing band together to stay alive and rebuild civilization, all while various weaker characters get turned into zombies themselves along the way and have to be put out of their misery by their old friends. This genre of television always suffers from one difficulty: how do you end the show? Because the vision presented is that the vast majority of the world, by virtue of their being dead, have become the enemies of those who are living and either need to be healed – which is always a process that has very little plausibility in these movies – or killed, which takes a very long time to pull off, and does not really make for good television. And the reason for this difficulty in ending the show is simple: we know that we cannot expect much from dead people, and that once they are dead, there is little more we can do for them. Or if you do not like zombie movies, then imagine for a moment a walk you might have taken through a cemetery. Taking walks through cemeteries is a great Christian spiritual discipline, and one of the great losses in our modern church design is that we do not have cemeteries outside of our gates. We are not faced with a reminder of the faithful saints who have gone before us Sunday by Sunday. And we are not reminded week by week that all flesh is grass, and that grass withers and fades. If my fascination here with cemeteries sounds morbid to you, perhaps it is because cemeteries do not tend to be places of great hope. There are few who walk through a cemetery and say to themselves ‘My my, how full this place is of possibility!’ In that way, walking through the cemetery can give you the same impression in real life that watching these zombie movies might: there is little that can be done for the dead.

Our text presents us with a vision of the world that is not that distinct from these zombie movies or that walk through a cemetery. What we read here is a vision of the world in which most, if not all, of humanity is dead. This time not because of some pervasive Rage Virus that has spread through humanity and zombified them, but because of sin and trespasses. But in the middle of this pervasive death, God enters in and decides to call some of those dead people back to life again. Not only that, but he elevates them to heavenly thrones with his Son, Jesus. Not only that, but he gives them a whole life and eternity full of good that they can do to God, to themselves, and to each other. This is a story of **a God who is Kind to the Dead.** And if you are a Christian, it is your story. So for the next few minutes this morning, I want to walk with you through this text as an exercise in remembering the things that we were, the things that God has done for us, and the things that we are made to do. These are the three sections of my sermon:

(1) remembering the things that we were.

(2) remembering the things that God has done for those who are in Jesus.

(3) Remembering those things that we are made to do.

I hope that through our time this morning, these three objects of our remembrance will be for us the occasion of knowing ourselves better, knowing this world better, and giving thanks and praise to a God who is kind to the dead.

So first, let us look at what we were before Christ met us. This is the concern of Ephesians 2:1-3 of our text this morning. Paul uses a cascade of descriptions of the state of one outside of the Christian faith, each of which gives a different description of the problem that will have to be solved if there is to be some hope for these people. Each of these descriptions articulates the problems that a God who is kind to the dead will have to solve if that God desires to do them any good. And the first description we are given, in the very first phrase of this text, is the description from which the title of my sermon is taken: “and you were *dead*.” Paul uses this language all over his epistles to describe the condition of those who are bound by the logic and the practice of sin. They are dead to Christ, but alive to sin. Typically this phrase in Paul means something like “unconcerned with” or “not governed by the logic of” – as when we say of a person who has wronged us “they is dead to me.” We mean that we are unconcerned with them; they are no longer the object of our care; we do not understand ourselves in relation to them at all.

But this description goes deeper still: we are not wounded in our ability to love God above all things, but dead to that possibility. If the great commandment of the Law is that we love the Lord our God with all of our heart, and with all of our soul, and with all of our mind, and we read here that we are *dead* to that possibility, then the logical entailment of this passage is this: apart from grace, we have worked our way into a terrible situation where we cannot obey God apart from grace. The variable here is clear: if God wills to save us, then we will be saved. And if he does not will to save us, we will not be saved. Augustine says precisely this in his *Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love:*

“But this part of the human race to which God has promised pardon and a share in His eternal kingdom, can they be restored through the merit of their own works? God forbid. For what good work can a lost man perform, except so far as he has been delivered from perdition? Can they do anything by the free determination of their own will? Again I say, God forbid. For it was by the evil use of his free will that man destroyed both it and himself. For, as a man who kills himself must, of course, be alive when he kills himself, but after he has killed himself ceases to live, and cannot restore himself to life; so when man by his own free will sinned, then sin being victorious over him, the freedom of his will was lost.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The metaphor of the person who kills himself here is instructive: he cannot contribute to his own resurrection. If you are a Christian and die before Jesus comes again, then on the last day he will resurrect you. But you will not assist him in your own resurrection. Nor do you assist him in your resurrection from being dead in trespasses in sins. This is what it means to be dead.

But this is not the only description Paul gives of those who are outside of the Christian faith. These next two phrases work together: *“following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air.”* To be dead in sin is not to be merely inactive, but to pledge allegiance to a rival power other than God. And this rival power is described in two ways: as *the course of this world* and *the prince of the power of the air.* Christians have historically taken this prince to be Satan, who is a usurper to the throne of God over this world, and who rules it unjustly, violently, oppressively, and fearfully as he knows his days are limited. “At present,” says the author of Hebrews, “we do not yet see all things in subjection to Jesus” (Heb. 2:8). Instead we have a pervasive, nagging, and accurate sense that things are not as they ought to be. Every knee does *not* bow, and every tongue does *not* confess, that Jesus is Lord. And even among those who do, their allegiance is sporadic at best and hypocritical at worst.

Note here in this text the easy harmony between *the course of this world* and *the prince of the power of the air.* It seems like there is a harmony between the prevailing wisdom of the world and the plans of this unjust tyrant. It seems that Paul wants us to see here behind the common way of doing things a dark puppet master pulling the strings of the world, all the while hiding behind a curtain through which we cannot see. Paul here is pulling back that curtain and showing us the skeleton of this current regime of the world: it is not neutral with regard to God, but is rather quite hostile to him. This is embodied in the violations of innocence that we see in the sex scandals sweeping the Roman Catholic Church and, newly, the Southern Baptist Convention: hostility toward the goodness of innocence. We see it in in the jailing by some real political regimes of those who would seek to preach the gospel in peace: hostility toward the truth of Christianity. We see it alive in ourselves when we know what we ought to do, but are compelled by some strange force within us *not* to live our lives in the light and in accordance with the good and the noble and the beautiful: hostility toward the commands of God. Do you remember the movie that David quoted in his sermon last week? *The Matrix?* Morpheus is telling Neo how the Matrix works – this system of illusion and falsehood that masquerades simply as the natural order of things. Morpheus says:

“The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us… You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.”

This is something like the ‘*prince of the power of the air’* working through *the course of this world.* And the call here in this text is to recognize it, and begin to make our lives incomprehensible within that Matrix. I will say more about that later on.

The third description we are given of what we were like before God found us and befriended us and caused us to draw breath again, is that we were *living in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind.* That is to say: we are blown about by disordered desires that come not just from the flesh but also from the mind. We did not desire rightly, and we did not see rightly. David’s sermons in this series discussed the disordered loves of the sinful heart, so I will not say more about them here except to direct you back to his sermons for reference.

The result of this sorry state is that we *were by nature children of wrath.* There is an ambiguity here between two possible meanings, and frequently in scripture I think ambiguity is solved by asserting the truth of both interpretations. The one interpretation is that it is the wrath of God upon us as a result of our sin. The second interpretation is that we are children of wrath who come to resemble our father, wrath, in our actions and our thinking. On this combined interpretation, God’s wrath is a holy hatred of all that corrupts what is good and true and beautiful, and our wrath is itself a hatred of what is good and true and beautiful except insofar as we can instrumentalize those things for ourselves. God’s holy wrath is against our selfish wrath.

But God is not *simply* wrathful, as this text will continue to say. But before I continue on to the second part of this sermon, I want to pause here and say that I have said these descriptions are reminders of what we were before God found us. They are past-tense. If you are here and you are not a Christian this morning, I am afraid I cannot tell you that this text describes what you *were,* but rather, it describes what you *are.* And I know that sounds so terribly implausible. Sure, you may not have a commitment to Jesus, but it seems a stretch to say that you are hostile, alienated, subservient to evil, and governed by wrath. But imagine with me for a moment that there were such a being as God in the world, who is holy, abounding in kindness, beautiful, good, and true beyond all reckoning. Would not even *apathy* about such a being be worthy of disapproval? We think that people who are ungrateful for Christmas presents to be somehow morally deficient; would this moral deficiency not be multiplied by infinity if it concerned the being who gave you life itself? And again we think there is something lacking in a person who can behold a stunning mountain vista or a perfectly proportioned painting and not be at least a little moved; would this lack not be multiplied by infinity if it were aimed at the beauty that excels all imagining? Apathy toward the Good, the True, and the Beautiful is troubling, and so much more so is apathy against the highest Good, highest Truth, and highest Beauty that is God himself. If you find in yourself even this apathy, I urge you today to repent and believe in Christ. Passages like this are why evangelicals have historically stressed the importance of personal conversion, since there is no neutrality toward God.

If you were to do that, and for all those who have done that, we have occasion to reflect **secondly on the things that God has done for those who are in Jesus**. This is the concern of vv. 4-9. Here we see again that our God is a God who is kind to the dead: *when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ.* Just as God did in the strange story of the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37, when he looked at those bones and commanded them to live again, so also did God do in each of you who is a Christian. God walked through the cemetery of your soul and said to himself words that no other has ever said: “what great plans I have for these corpses!” Do you recall the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11? We read there that “Jesus, deeply moved, went down to the tombs” (John 11:38). God brings the springtime of resurrection to the frozen winter of the tombs. And Paul insists in our passage today that you recognize this story of Lazarus is not merely a cool anecdote from history; it is a picture of what he did *for you.* God saw you wrapped in grave clothes and stinking with rot and decay, and he was kind to the dead.

In this text we have this phrase three times; *with him –* once in v.5, and twice in v.6. The path of our resurrection is the way of Jesus. You see, there is a wordplay in my title here. To be ‘kind’ is, etymologically, to be ‘kin’ to one, and a kin is one who acts kindly toward another. When God is kind to us, the deeper meaning of this word is that God has initiated a relationship with us in which he has become kin to us.[[2]](#footnote-2) Christ is our elder brother, and we imitate him in our own paths of resurrection. When your soul first awake from its death in sin, you sat up from your casket, looked around, and were surprised to see footsteps leading out of the tombs – the footsteps of the very Son of God whom the grave could not hold. And because it could not hold him, it did not and will not hold you. And you may have been content to find those footsteps leading up into the sunlit day; but no, they led you all the way to the heavenly places. Compares v.6 here to 1:20. We have the same two verbs there and here: raised and seated. Paul is teaching us to find our lives in the story of Jesus. Paul is teaching is to think of ourselves as dead, resurrected, and ascending to glory. This is the result of the kindness of God toward the dead: he removes your graveclothes and put on you a robe and a crown. You now, my dear brother, sister in Christ – you now are the heir of the whole world. This universe which is even now ruled by a usurping tyrant and which yearns for the revealing of the sons of God, is yours because you are Christ’s.

All of this is of grace. All of it unexpected. All of it undeserved. This section, Ephesians 2:8-9 is one of the great texts of the Protestant Reformation, and one of the great texts of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. This phrase *by grace you have been saved* appears twice, and the first time is right in the middle of another sentences, as if Paul is so excited to display to you just how very kind God has been to your corpse that he gets ahead of himself by a verse or two. When you have as keen and systematic a mind as Paul start to get ahead of himself in a passage like this, you know that he is terrifically excited about his interjection: *by grace you have been saved.* And in case we are unclear about what grace might mean here, he specifies it: *the gift of God, not by works, so that no one may boast.* You see the temptation of the foregoing verse might be to say that because those *outside* of Christ are dead, are hostile, are alienated, then we Christians who are not might think ourselves to superior to them. And Paul demands here that grace cuts out boasting at its heart. What Paul is doing here is taking the great Jewish theme of election and expanding it also to include those Gentiles on whom God has set his favor. And just as God in the Old Testament was insistent that Israel not boast in its election, Paul is insisting that you, Christian, not boast in yours. Recall Deuteronomy 7:6-8,

“You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery ,from the hand of Pharaoh the King.”

God loves you, Israel, because he loves you. God loves you, Christian, because he loves you. And you can spend eternity trying to dive into the depths of that love. You will never succeed in understanding the love of God for you, but the exploration of that love will be the happiest failure of your life. You will not succeed because God has said that *in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* That is one of the great purposes of eternity: it shall take forever for God to show you the love that God has for you. But that is not the only thing for which we are called. And this takes us to our third and final section of this sermon.

**Third, we remember those things that we are made to do.**

This is the concern of v.10, *we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* As God walked among the tombs of our souls, he saw acts of love and justice and mercy and generosity and faith and hope and love cascading out of the hope-filled futures of these corpses. And now that we draw our breath again, we have marching orders. These marching orders are the theme of your church this year: love God, love neighbor. This is what life in God’s new economy is like.

Contrast this with the ‘prince of the power of the air,’ and realize that there is a logic, a system of order, a way of life that is supposed to mark the church that does not make sense outside of it. Another way to say this is: in order to know what I ought to do, I need to know what story I am in. And if I am in a story of restless acquisitiveness, of storing up for myself gold and silver and university degrees and social prestige, then that is going to dictate a kind of life for me: it will not include much wasted time, but it will be full to the brim with stress, and my success or failure as a person will hang on my success or failure as a student or as a money-maker. If the story is one of competition all the way down, then our marching orders are those of Captain Jack Sparrow in *The Pirates of the Caribbean:* “take what is yours, and give nothing back.” But if we inhabit a story in which we were dead with Christ, then raised with Christ, then ascended to thrones with Christ, we might begin to get the hint that our lives are to take the shape of the life of Christ. And as we study the life of Christ, we will begin to imitate it in such a way that might not make sense to the rest of the world that operates according to a very different logic. The Eastern Orthodox churches have a special category of holy man who are called ‘holy fools.’ They are fools because their actions are not comprehensible to much of the world; they are holy because these acts are of radical generosity, hospitality, love, self-sacrifice. In short, precisely because they look so very much like Jesus, they do not make much sense to those who have not seen Jesus. This is my prayer for us this morning, friends. I pray that we would be, as Paul says elsewhere, “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). I do not say that this will be easy; to be a Christian is to desire to look like a man by whom the world was so confused that they murdered him. But nevertheless, follow him, dear brothers and sisters. My prayer for you is that you wake up tomorrow and allow your sorrow of going to school or to work give way to a different thought: *what acts of love might I perform today? Which of the good works stored up for me by God since the foundation of the universe might I walk in today? Where might the footsteps of Jesus that once led me out of the tomb and onto the throne lead me today?* There is a grave behind you and glory before you, and at your feet the footsteps of the God-man who walks with us every step of the way. Let us follow him, then, and so be imitators of the God who is kind to the dead.

Now hear and receive a benediction from the Word of the Lord, Hebrews 13:20-21,

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you might do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

1. Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love,* Ch.XXX. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Janet Soskice, *The Kindness of God* (Oxford UP, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)