

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

But God

Ephesians 2:1-7

Mark Vroegop

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:1-7).

One of my favorite Sundays throughout the year is when we celebrate baptisms. There is something incredibly powerful about the moment when a person testifies to what they were like prior to a relationship with Jesus and how their life has been changed.

It never gets old hearing the stories of how God rescues people. Baptism is an amazing ordinance of the church as we get a vivid illustration of the transformation that takes place. It symbolizes the whole-person redemption and what it means to be buried with Christ and raised to new life. Baptism shows us the kind of change that happens when a person receives Jesus as his or her Savior.

That's one of the reasons I'd like to remind you about the importance of being baptized. It's a powerful picture and a poignant message. Some of you should seriously consider making 2023 the year when you take that step.

But baptism isn't just powerful for the person in the water. It's also deeply meaningful for every Christian who witnesses the moment. The reason is because it's a reminder of every Christian's redemption. In other words, when we hear the stories of brothers and sisters who have been rescued by Jesus, it reconnects us to our rescue by Jesus. Seeing their joy and passion reminds us about our joy and passion. What's more, baptism reminds us that the bottom-line story for every Christian is that we were in desperate need of redemption.

The book of Ephesians is about Christian identity—becoming who we are. And one of the keys for Christian identity is **remembering our redemption**. This started in the Old Testament with the Israelites regularly rehearsing their redemption from Egypt. It was the signature event that marked them as God's people. The journey from slavery and through the Red Sea is even a picture of baptism.

Ephesians 2:1-7 highlights the central identity marker of redemption, and Paul highlights seven characteristics of our past and seven characteristics of God's power. His goal? To help the Ephesian Christians (and us) remember our redemption.

In other words, one of the keys to maintaining Christian identity is not to get too far removed from the saving grace of God. In other words, we need to regularly remember our redemption.

Our Past (vv. 1-3)

The first three verses of chapter 2 provide a thorough diagnosis of the human condition apart from Christ. What follow are seven characteristics that describe what Christians are like before they trust in Jesus. In other words, this is a clear description of our past.

Now, when you read verse 1 you probably personalize it. You take the "you" to mean you. That's understandable because every Christian—no matter when you received Jesus—has a past from which they have been redeemed. We may have different circumstances and unique stories, but the fact is we needed redemption.

However, it's important to understand that Paul is talking to the entire church. It was made up of individuals, but the word "you" is plural. If you are from the South insert "you-all." If you are from the North put in "you guys."

Why is that important? Well, because this is the description of every human being apart from Jesus, and it defines our identity. In order to become who we are, we need to understand where we all came from. And I know that you may know that you needed rescuing, but Paul wants to make it very clear how desperately we needed it. Take note of the following descriptions:

1) Dead men walking

The first characteristic relates to the extent of our sinfulness. Verse 1 uses the term "dead in the trespasses and sins." Take note of the word "dead." That's important because it describes our total spiritual incapacitation. To be dead is to be powerless—unable to do anything about our condition. Paul doesn't say that we were "sick in our sins" or "struggling in our transgressions" or "drowning in judgment." Nope. We were dead: spiritually lifeless, helpless, and powerless.

Now, the reason that's important is because Paul also says, "in which you once walked" (v. 2). So, it's not as though "dead" means doing nothing. We were still living our lives. That's what "walked" means. But the great irony (and tragedy) is that while we were physically alive, we were spiritually dead. We were dead men walking.

It might have appeared to everyone else that you were doing just fine. But from a spiritual and eternal perspective, you were dead. We needed rescuing because we were dead men walking.

2) Following the masses

Our dead condition wasn't unique. That's part of the problem. Verse 1 also says, "following the course of this world." That means that part of the challenge is the fact that everyone is heading the same direction and living the same way. There was a gravitational pull that is delusional. Our lost condition was so normal.

3) Spiritual battle

Beyond our earthly lives and how we "walked," there was also a battle taking place in the spiritual realm. Verse 2b tells us that the course of the world is informed by "the prince of the power of the air," the Devil. What's more this spiritual influence is behind the actions of the "sons of disobedience." In other words, chaos and sinfulness of the world is connected to an unseen, spiritual battle.

4) Misplaced desires

Verse 3 points to the problem of our misplaced desires. Paul says, "lived in the passions of our flesh." In the New Testament, the term "flesh" is used for the wicked, earthly part of us that desires everything that is anti-god. Passion is the same word as desire. So, it's that innate sinful desire for the things that are not right. Paul identifies that our past was intimately connected to these misplaced desires—wanting the things that were destroying us.

5) Sinful living

But it's not just our desires that are problematic. Our actions and how we lived followed right behind. "Carrying out the desires of the body and the mind..." Sinful desires are grievous enough, but it's also true that we acted on our wrong desires. This seems obvious, but Paul is painting a wholistic picture of what was really going on. Our misplaced desires led to grievous actions and sinful living.

6) Natural-born sinners

Yet, it's not just what we did. Our redemption need was basic to who we are. We are natural-born sinners. According to verse 4, we are "by nature children of wrath." This means that our rebellion isn't something that we learn; it's who we are. This means that you don't just need a reformed identity; you need a completely changed identity. But you need it at the very core of who you are. We are natural-born sinners in desperate need of redemption.

7) Nothing special

We're just like everyone else. There are no righteous people. We are all sinners. We may have different stories and backgrounds and experiences, but at the end of the day, we are just wicked people desperately in need of redemption.

Whew! That's quite a list isn't it? 1) Dead men walking, 2) Following the masses, 3) Spiritual battles, 4) Misplaced desires, 5) Sinful living, 6) Natural-born sinners, 7) Nothing special. These are the characteristics of our past. And it's the same for everyone.

Understanding your Christian identity means embracing this reality when it comes to your past. It doesn't mean that you glory in your past or celebrate it with some kind of perverse bragging rights. But it does mean that you have an appropriate sense of what you needed rescuing from.

It means that you understand the depth, the layers, and extent of your spiritual desperation. It means you embrace the fact that you were dead, really dead.

God's Power (vv. 4-7)

Now to the point that Paul is really trying to make! The previous seven characteristics are important in understanding our past and our need for redemption. But they are highlighted because of what follows, especially with two critical words: "But God...."

Oh, what glorious words they are! In fact, you might be able to summarize the entirety of Christian identity with those two words. Becoming who we are doesn't happen apart from "But God...." Christians are those who've experienced the powerful intervention of God in their lives.

Paul's aim in this text is not to overly dwell on the past tragedy of our lives, but to celebrate the triumph of God's grace. God's power is greater than our past. Hallelujah!

We find seven characteristics of God's power in verses 4-7.

1) Rich in mercy

What is striking about this list is the level of God-centeredness of it. The reason, of course, is that in order for our rescue to happen, we need a powerful God. So, Paul makes it very clear that a right understanding of God's grace leads to a deep appreciation and love for him.

The first thing he mentions is that God is "rich in mercy." What a statement! It's not just that God has mercy or that he extends mercy or that he provides mercy. No! All of that is true. But God is rich in mercy. It's an incredible contrast to our spiritual poverty and powerlessness.

Notice that he starts with mercy. It's an attribute connected to something provided to those who are in need. Mercy implies that there are people who are in need of help. And the promise-filled hope here is that God is rich in mercy.

Tim Keller, who passed away this week, said, ""If you were a hundred times worse than you are, your sins would be no match for his mercy.""¹

There's never a debt of sin that God can't pay with his mercy. He is rich in mercy!

2) Incredible love

Paul then turns to God's love with a particular focus. Verse 4 emphasizes not only the greatness of God's love, but it also highlights the greatness of the love that he set on us. This is more than just a description

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/50-quotes-tim-keller/>

of God's character and his heart. It's a statement of the incredible love that God has poured out on his people. It's a love that flows from God to his people. In other words, Paul is reiterating what John says in 1 John 4

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

3) Unworthy affection

One of the reasons that his love is incredible is because of our unworthiness of his affection for us. Verse 5 states this very clearly: "even when we were dead in our trespasses." God set his affection on us because of him not because of us. God's love for us says something powerful about him.

Notice that God sets his love on us while we are dead. It's not that he loves us as we're the trying, imperfect humans that we are. It's not that he sets his love on us as we reach out to him. No! God loves us in our helpless, lifeless, and godless state. We are unworthy of such love. And yet his power is seen in his unworthy affection.

4) Miraculous change

The effect of God's intervention in our lives is a miraculous change. Verse 5b describes this in resurrection terms: "made us alive together with Christ." Conversion or the new birth is in view here. Our previous life was marked by being dead. The new life offered to us in Jesus is that we are made alive. We move from dead men walking to spiritually alive people truly living. It is an absolute miracle.

And it's connected to the resurrection of Jesus. The only reason there is the possibility of new life is because of his victory. His life creates new life in us. That's why Christian identity must be understood in the context of two essential words: "in Christ."

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22).

5) Based upon grace

But how does this happen? Paul reminds us that this power of God is not something that we can accomplish or achieve. It is only a work of grace: "by grace you have been saved." Grace means receiving something you didn't deserve or earn. It's not only that we were helpless and powerless—dead! But we also must embrace that our redemption was accomplished only by the goodness and mercy and kindness of God.

There's nothing in our identity that we earned. Everything that we have and everything that we are is only ours because of God's grace to us.

6) Spiritual blessing

Christian identity means living for another realm—a heavenly one. Ephesians talks a lot about thinking this way. It regularly invites us to see beyond our earthly life. And verse 6 connects our spiritual

resurrection with being “seated...with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” We read this same theme of spiritual blessing in 1:18-20. The point is that our identity is connected to blessing in another world.

7) For the glory of God

The final characteristic of God’s power is the finish line, the goal, or the reason for all of this. Why did God lavish his mercy on us? It was to magnify his great name, to display his glory. God’s aim is to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ. In other words, God’s purpose in pouring out his great power is to magnify the riches of his grace. The goal is for the entire created order to stop and marvel at the goodness, mercy, kindness, and love of God.

In other words, when Christian identity is understood and embraced, it doesn’t strut. No, Christian identity bows low, bends the knee, and ducks so that people can see the glory of God. Yes, we need to become who we are. There are spiritual realities that we need to embrace but embracing them creates a beautiful humility.

Christian identity means **remembering our redemption**. This is key. Becoming who we are requires a regular rehearsing of two things that need to be kept in balance and together: (1) our past and (2) God’s power.

Again Tim Keller says, ““The gospel says you are simultaneously more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope.”²

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² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/50-quotes-tim-keller/>