

The Regenerating Grace and Resurrecting Power of our Irresistible Savior (Eph 2:4-5)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on March 20, 2011

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Ephesians 2 is the spiritual biography of every believer. Last week we closed with video testimonials of believers who've understood and experienced the timeless truths of this chapter. Today I want to begin and end with a testimonial, one from last century America (J. Vernon McGee), one from 1800s Scotland (Horatius Bonar) – 2 different men, countries, backgrounds, stories, but the same grace.

J. Vernon McGee introduced Eph. 2 as his spiritual autobiography:

'When I look back upon my own conversion, I really think it was a miracle. How in the world could God save a boy who had been brought up as I had been? ... I found myself adrift in the world. I ran all the way to Detroit, Michigan, to get away from every authority ... There I got into awful sin ... I got homesick and went back home, and when I think back to it now, I realize that it was God who made me homesick ... I was dead to God and to the things of God. [But] a man told me I could have peace with God through Jesus Christ. How wonderful that was! I say it was a miracle [because] I wasn't looking for God. I was running from Him as fast as I could ... with no capacity or inclination to God ...

Adam died spiritually the day he disbelieved and disobeyed God. He ran away from God and tried to hide. He wasn't looking for God. That is the position of natural man today. This idea that men have a little spark of the divine and are looking for God is as false as can be [Rom 3:11 says "*there is none who seek God*"]. On the day Adam disobeyed, he died to God and to the things of God ... he didn't die physically [instantly]... he was spiritually dead, separated from God. He passed that same dead nature on to all his offspring ...

[McGee] had the privilege of being pastor of a great church in downtown Los Angeles ... [he said] I would always pray as I left the radio room to go to the pulpit platform to preach, "Lord God, I recognize that I am helpless and hopeless. I will be speaking into a graveyard—many sitting out there are dead in trespasses and sins. ... Only the Spirit of God can speak so that dead men will hear. Thank God, the Spirit of God did move and continues to move so that dead men are able to hear! ... [Ephesians 2:1-3 describes] our condition: dead in trespasses and sins and energized by Satan. That is the description of us before we were saved, and every unsaved man is walking around in this world like a spiritual zombie.'¹

Ephesians 2:4 ***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 (by grace you have been saved) ...***

1. You Were Spiritually Dead (v. 1)
2. You Were Satanically Driven (v. 2)
3. You Were Stubbornly Disobedient (v. 2-3)
4. You Were Sinfully Depraved (v. 3b)
5. **You Were Sovereignly Delivered (Eph. 2:4-5)**
 - **But God**
 - **Because of His Mercy and Love, not Us**
 - **Brought us from Death to Life by Grace Alone**

But God

Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached a whole sermon on “But God.” He called it Christianity in 2 words: “*But God ...*” He said these ‘two words, in and of themselves, in a sense contain the whole of the gospel. The gospel tells of what God has done, God’s intervention; it is something that comes entirely from outside us and displays to us that wondrous and amazing and astonishing work of God ... There is only one hope for man in sin, says Paul – ‘*but God*’. Men need to be regenerated; they must be given a new nature ...’²

But God in v. 4 sums up how grace answers each phrase of v. 1-3:

v. 1 “*And you were dead*” – **But God** made us alive in v. 5

v. 1b “*in your sins*” – **But God** forgave our sins in Eph. 1:7

2:2a “*you formerly walked according to the course of this world*” - **But God** gave us a new course of life, not of this world, a new walk (v. 10 says ‘*that God prepared beforehand for us to walk in*’)

v. 2c “*according to the prince of the power of the air*” - **But God** has subjected all powers under Christ who is far above them, 1:21-22, and Eph 6 gives us the resources to withstand all of the flaming arrows of the evil one, and to stand firm in Christ’s superior power

2:2d “*the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience*” - **But God** gave us a new spirit, v. 18, HS who helps us obey (5:18f)

2:3a “*we all formerly lived*” - **But God** has given *new life* (v. 5)

2:3b “*lusts ... desires ... mind*” - **But God** when He regenerates us in v. 5 gives us new desires, and a new mind, the mind of Christ

2:3c “*we were by nature ...*” - **But God** gives a new nature in v. 5

2:3d “*were children of wrath*” - **But God** adopts us and makes us children of God (1:5), bringing us near through the blood of Jesus (2:13), putting the wrath we deserved on His Son on the cross

We all had sinned and fallen short of God’s glory, all depraved in spiritual graves, dead to God, but very alive and active in our sin. We all like sheep had gone astray, all to our own way (Isaiah 53:6) Paul says in v. 1-2, all living and loving the wrong things, *but God*. We would have kept going willingly habitually continually on our broad road to destruction, **but God** came *rescuing us, redeeming us* as a substitute sheep in our place, *ransoming us* as a Lamb slain for us, *redirecting us* to His path through repentance, *regenerating our nature* to stay on His path, *reorienting our affections* to find Christ irresistible and beautiful, *renewing our mind* to desire the Word and be changed by it, *reviving our hearts* to love and treasure Jesus

But God is my story; this is my song, let’s be praising our Savior all the day long that *But God* is in v. 4. Turn to Gen. 8, and let’s take a tour of the *But God* statements in redemptive history. These 2 words – *But God* – become a theme in Scripture, especially about God’s grace, deliverance, redemption (physically, spiritually, both)

Genesis 8:1 ***But God*** remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark ... [i.e., kept them alive] On the backdrop of wrath/flood, God gives grace to some. They would have all died, *but God*. Look also at Genesis 45, how God used Joseph in a famine, where they all would have died, *but God*:

Gen 45:7 “*God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.*”⁸ “*Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, **but God** ...*

In Genesis 50:20 is Joseph’s most famous line: *As for you, you meant evil against me, **but God** meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive ...*

Turn to Psalm 73. We could also look at the story of Samson when he was about to die of thirst physically, it says *But God* saved him (Judges 15:19). Another good example of physical deliverance from death is Philippians 2:27, where Paul says Epaphroditus “*was sick to the point of death, **but God had mercy on him***” (similar to Eph. 2:4, “***but God**, being rich in **mercy** ... when you were **dead***”).

We won’t look at every “but God” text, but Ps 73:26 is a good one:

*My flesh and my heart may fail, **But God** is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

“But God” is where we must keep orienting our thinking, when our physical strength is gone, when our heart fails, when emotions and fears, discouragements, even depression come ... *but God* is there! Listen to Paul in 2 Cor. 7:5 “*our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within.*”⁶ **But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us** by the coming of Titus ...

Those may be the most powerful 2 words in God’s Word: *but God*. Psalm 49:15 is a good one for *but God* redeeming/saving eternally: ¹⁵**But God** will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol [or grave / death], *For He will receive me.* [OT faith in future resurrection]

In Acts 2 Peter picks up on this theme from the Psalms, quoting from David about resurrection and Messiah, and speaks of the darkest day of human history, and brightest *but God*:
Acts 2:22 *Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene ...²³this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.* ²⁴**But God** raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.

In Acts 13, Paul preaches: ²⁹“*When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb.*”³⁰ **But God** raised Him from the dead ... (That same Paul in Eph 2:4-5 “**But God**...raised us from the dead.”)

2 Cor 1:9 “*we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, **but God who raises the dead**; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us,*

But God to Paul was a statement of ultimate hope, ultimate trust, because our salvation was not ultimately our doing, *but God*’s. He delivered us from so great a peril of death to so great a salvation. God wants us to remember we were under the sentence of death and were in a state of spiritual death and still would be, *but God*. And the result God intends is we not trust in ourselves, *but God*. Even Paul as a redeemed man said “I know there is nothing good in me, that is my flesh.” He was insufficient, *but God*.

To Paul, *But God* was also a statement of the ultimate cause of life.

Look at 1 Corinthians 3:6: *I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.* ⁷*So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.*

We closed last week with 1 Cor. 1:27, another great *But God* verse:

²⁷*but God has chosen the foolish ...*

[You say, “wait, I thought I chose God in salvation, He saw I would be wise enough to choose Jesus so He chose me?” But Jesus says in John 15:16 “*You did not choose me, but I chose you*” and v. 5 “*apart from Me you can do nothing*”]

²⁷*but God has chosen the foolish... to shame the wise ...*

[I loved that video last week, the married couple who said smiling, “we are those foolish ones God has chosen,” one said “we weren’t saved because we were smarter,” i.e. we needed Him to choose us; another said “we were all dead in sins” but God chose us to be made alive in Christ by grace]

²⁸*... the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are,* ²⁹*so that no man may boast before God.* ³⁰*But by His doing you are in Christ ...*

Go back a few pages to Rom 5, maybe the most famous *But God*? ⁶*For while we were still helpless* [or powerless, unable], *at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.* ⁷*For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die.* ⁸*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us* [v. 11] *...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God ...*

This brings us to the 2nd phrase and 2nd part of our message in 2:4:

1. But God

2. Because of His Mercy and Love, Not Us

It’s not us demonstrating our own love toward God, it’s: *but God, demonstrating His own love toward us...while we were yet sinners!* Paul goes out of his way to make emphatic the point that it was not because of us in any way that we were redeemed. God reconciled us to Himself not *when we became friendly to Christ*, v. 11 says *while we were still enemies of Christ we were reconciled by God.*

It wasn’t when *I had the power in me* to come to Him, it was in v. 6 *while I was still powerless* [or helplessly weak, the Grk word can also be translated “impotent”] ... *but God* has omnipotent power to redeem and rescue me in that state, to raise me up, Eph. 2:4 says.

Ephesians 2:4-5 “*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 ...*”

- Verse 4 doesn’t begin: “*But I, being rich in ability* (where other poor sinners just couldn’t see things like I could and weren’t wise enough to make the right choice like me)...”
- No, look at the text, v.4: “But God, being rich in mercy...”
-
- Not “*because of my great love with which I loved God*”
- What does v. 4 say? Look at the text: “... because of His great love with which He loved us ...”

- v. 5 doesn't say "*when we were deciding to follow Jesus*"
- Look at the text, v. 5: "*when we were dead ...*"

- It doesn't say "*we were diseased, in trouble ...*"
- Look at the text, v.5 says "*we were dead in transgressions*"

- v. 5 doesn't say '*He made us well from sickness when we made the right choice of medicine ...*'
- Look at the text: '*when we were dead in transgressions, He made us alive ...*'

- v.5 doesn't end with "*by your good choice you're saved...*"
- Look at the text: "*by grace you have been saved ...*"

The choir sang earlier of this grace, on back of your note sheet:

God, who was rich in mercy and love without compare, Saved us by grace.
We who were **dead in sin and lost in our despair**, God saved by grace.

It is by grace that we are pardoned. Be grace we are **set free** ... [we're not free before, we're slaves of sin as we saw last week and need to be set free by grace]

... We, who are undeserving of all that God has done, We know God's grace.
We **have been made alive** with Jesus Christ, the Son, God's gift of grace.

[Last stanza] It is by grace that we are pardoned and raised with Christ above.
By grace we are **receivers** of God's immeasurable love ...

We're not the reason for His love, we're the recipients of His love. If it's based on something in us, seen or foreseen, it's not grace. It's not *because of who we are (what God sees in us) or because we did something*, therefore God's grace kicks in and He can save ... no, it's *because of who God is. It's because of what God sees in Christ. It's because God did something for us and to us and in us, regeneration, giving us life. It's His prior work of grace in v. 4-5 or else we'd never come to faith in v. 8.* Grace precedes faith in the order of these verses, and in the order of the Christian life of faith. Regeneration or resurrection precedes response. God's love comes before and causes our love. The new birth comes before new life.

We've looked at John 1:13 before, which says we're born again, "*born not of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man, **but of God.***" There's another but God statement: new birth isn't because of our will, it didn't come from flesh or from man, but from God, *but God*

Look at 1 Peter 1:3, which uses the same word *mercy* from Eph 2:4

³*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who **according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead***

Look back at Titus 3, another key regeneration or "new birth" passage, and it has the same key words as Eph 2: *love* and *mercy*.

Titus 3:3 *For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures [sounds like an enslaved will to me], spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.* ⁴**But** when the kindness of **God** our Savior and His **love** for mankind appeared, ⁵**He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of **regeneration** and renewing by the HS ...**

The HS is the subject and agent of regeneration or rebirth (Jesus calls it in John 3 being “*born of the Spirit*”). It’s not a cooperating or collaborative enterprise. Sanctification is, but regeneration isn’t. Regeneration is God’s initial work, initiating, instigating, creating life, making alive inside, or in the KJV “quickenings” (life-giving). Sanctification (growth in Christ after conversion) requires my deeds, decisions, discipline, but Regeneration is all God’s doing. Regeneration isn’t a team effort of HS plus help of self. John 6:63 says “*It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is no help at all*” (ESV)

It’s not by my *deeds of righteousness*, it’s a *divine regeneration*. It’s not *according to man*, it’s *according to the mercy of God* alone in v. 5. The HS regenerates, cleanses our heart, washes us clean, renews our nature. It’s not based on *our life*, v. 4 says, but *His love*

You Were Sovereignly Delivered (Eph. 2:4-5)

1. But God
2. Because of His Mercy and Love, not Us
3. **Brought us from Death to Life by Grace Alone**

Eph. 2:5 *Even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),*

Colossians 2:13 “**When you were dead in your transgressions ... He made you alive together with Him**”

We’ll look at the key phrase “together with Christ” next week and the results of our union with Christ in v. 6-7 next week, but friends, this is the Gospel 101. Jesus said in John 5:24 those who believe in Him “*have eternal life and ... have passed from death to life.*”

In Luke’s gospel, Lk 15, Jesus tells 3 stories to illustrate salvation:

- 1) a lost sheep that would have been dead except the shepherd finds it, puts it on his shoulders and brings it back with joy, that’s what repentance is and what heaven is like afterwards
- 2) a lost coin that is found (a coin doesn’t find itself, it’s found) and there’s rejoicing in heaven when God finds lost sinners
- 3) the father (representing God) says of the prodigal (represents lost sinners found by God, who would be dead without Him):

Luke 15:24 “*this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.*’ And they began to celebrate ... ³²... we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was **dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.**’ ”

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found [by God], was blind but now I see

I once was blinded by sin, *but God* made me see a sweet Savior in Christ. I once saw Christ and church as boring, now I see beauty and glory. God is the One who takes us, breaks us, remakes us, and shapes us to the likeness of Christ. God is the One who saved my life, gave me sight, and made me alive. It wasn't me – it was God's regenerating, affection-creating, soul-saving, heart-changing, amazing grace!

I once resisted Christ but now I find Christ irresistible by grace. I once was utterly uninterested in church, unmoved by sermons about the Lord, unconcerned about spiritual things, unresponsive to the things of the Lord. Like Eph 2 I once was dead spiritually *but God* moved in my heart that was moving away from Him, He gave me a concern for my soul and made me aware I was going to hell despite my spiritual upbringing and sinner's prayer I had prayed as a little kid, I wasn't regenerated till He awakened my soul to grace. He became the most interesting and compelling Person to me then, and now the things of the Lord dominate my thoughts, life, loves.

I know that wasn't me, or anything natural to me, I knew my heart! Even though I grew up in a Christian home I sing as my testimony:

I ... was **lost in darkest night** Yet thought I knew the way.
 The sin that promised joy and life Had led me to **the grave**.
I had no hope that You would own **A rebel** to Your will.
And if You had not loved me first I would refuse You still.
 But as I ran my hell-bound race, **Indifferent** ...
 You looked upon **my helpless state** ...
 Hallelujah! Jesus is my life! [say *Hallelujah!* if you have Christ]

Regeneration took my indifference and gave me insatiable hunger for God's Word instead!
 Regeneration took this rebel and made him revel in God's mercy! Regeneration takes one unwilling and persuades him to be willing! Regeneration takes spiritually dead corpses and makes them alive!
 Regeneration brought us totally depraved to become totally saved!

We define regeneration theologically, but let me biographically. I shared an American testimony earlier, here's the Scottish brother I said I'd share. Horatius Bonar, 19th century preacher, understood regenerating grace and he wrote his testimony poetically in a hymn

I was a wandering sheep, I did not love the fold;
 I did not love my Shepherd's voice, I would not be controlled.
 I was a wayward child, I did not love my home;
 I did not love my Father's voice, I loved afar to roam.

[*But God*] The Shepherd sought His sheep, The Father sought His child;
 [God]³ followed me o'er vale and hill, O'er deserts waste and wild;
 [God] found me nigh to death, Famished and faint and lone;
 [God] bound me with the bands of love, [God] saved the wand'ring one.

[God] spoke in tender love, [God] raised my drooping head,
 [God] gently closed my bleeding wounds, My fainting soul [God] fed;
 [God] washed my filth away, [God] made me clean and fair;
 [God] brought me to my home in peace, The long sought wanderer.

Jesus my Shepherd is: 'Twas He that loved my soul;
 'Twas He that washed me in His blood, 'Twas He that made me whole.
 'Twas He that sought the lost, That found the wand'ring sheep,
 'Twas He that brought me to the fold, 'Tis He that still doth keep.

No more a wandering sheep, I love to be controlled;
 I love my tender Shepherd's voice, I love the peaceful fold.
 No more a wayward child, I seek no more to roam;
 I love my heavenly Father's voice, I love, I love His home!⁴

Do you love the Lord's voice? Do you love His fold? Do you love His house and being with His sheep, the church? Do you love to be controlled by the Shepherd now? Do you love the Shepherd now? 1 John 4:19 says "*We love because He first loved us.*" As v. 4 says it is because of God's great love that He made us alive, this is why and how we love (Eph 5:2). If God gave you life, He also gave you love for Him and His things. If God has saved you, He's changed you and is changing you, in how you live, in who you love, in what you love. Regeneration means salvation is a change of nature. "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation*" (2 Cor. 5:17). You know you're in Christ if "*old things are gone...new things have come.*"

Has God regenerated you? Are you in v. 1-3 or 4-5? Dead or alive? Are you just sitting here enduring this stuff, or is it exciting to you? If you have an ounce of spiritual life, gospel truths must move you!

Is v. 2 your past or present: "*you formerly walked...*" (walking = lifestyle, pattern of living, step-by-step, day-by-day). If you're a Christian, this used to mark your life; this is what your life *once was*. How do you know if you're dead or alive spiritually (v. 1)? Look at v. 2 and your life – is this what you were or what you are?

If v. 2 isn't your former life and walk, if this is what your present life is dominated by and driven by and living for, if the unbroken pattern of your life is still in v. 1-3, you can't apply v. 4-5 to you about being saved by grace, because you're still in v. 1-3. You may have prayed a sinner's prayer years ago, you may go to church and still be spiritually dead (Rev. 3:1). You don't need to recommit your life, you need to be regenerated. You don't have the power; look to Christ, the power of the cross, power of His resurrection.

Trust Him alone to save your soul and change your life. Beg Him to do for you what you cannot ever do for yourself, and by grace turn from your hell-bound path; repent, turn to Jesus. Fall before His feet as His lowly slave pleading with Him for grace, and any who come humbly and truly, He will not ever cast away!

Don't say, "I know I'm not perfect, *but I* try to be a good person" – say "I'm a sinner deserving hell right now, *but God* have mercy." Your only hope and mine is v. 4 "*But God, being rich in mercy ...*"

Brian Borgman has said: 'until you *feel* the rope around your neck of divine condemnation and *feel* the weight on your back like Bunyan's Christian did, and *feel* the shakiness of that scaffold beneath you, knowing that the bottom may soon drop out; it's only until you *feel* these things, that you'll see your need for a Savior.'⁵

He's right. There's no amazing grace if you think you don't need it. But if you feel sin's weight and guilt, and say with Paul "*wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?*" Jesus can deliver from death to life, thanks be to Jesus who was executed in my place, took the weight of God's wrath I deserved, giving me grace not justice, heaven not hell, light not darkness, life not death!

Spurgeon wrote in his *Autobiography*: 'a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him that hath had it. It is terrible in the drinking, but it is most wholesome in the bowels ... [he said good evangelism shouldn't quickly give peace; first lead the soul to] see its blackness before assuring it that it is "clean ..." Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Savior. He who has stood before his God, convicted and condemned, with the rope about his neck, is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him, and to live to the honor of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.'⁶

If as you read v. 2-3, that is your "former" life, *but God* has raised you and changed you from the inside out, now to new life and new desires, if He's saved you by grace so that you're not that person you once were, praise God. Praise God for "*But God*" in your life.

John Newton, saved while a slave-trader: "I'm not what I might be, I'm not what I ought to be, I'm not what I wish to be, I'm not what I hope to be; but I thank God *I'm not what I once was*, and I can say with the great Apostle, '*by the grace of God I am what I am.*'"

¹ J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1981), Vol. 5, p. 232-33.

² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation*, p. 59, 65.

³ Original "They" (referring to Father and Son) changed to "[God]" throughout for the purpose of this sermon to avoid confusion – PL

⁴ Horatius Bonar, "I Was a Wandering Sheep" (source: nethymnal.org)

⁵ Brian Borgman, sermonaudio.com message on Total Depravity.

⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, chapter 10.