



Lesson 4: The Gospel for Believers

Teacher's Edition

Overview: Paul reviews what God has done for believers in salvation by bringing them from death to life. He reminds believers of what they looked like before salvation in Christ, what they look like after salvation in Christ, and how that salvation was accomplished.

Purpose: Your group should understand that the gospel is not just for the lost, it is for believers as well! They should clearly understand **1) what the gospel is and 2) how the truth of the gospel can and should change their everyday lives.**

Introduction

Have you ever found yourself listening to a preacher give a gospel presentation and found yourself thinking, “This is good. I hope unsaved people are listening!” Or perhaps you looked around and thought, “Why is he preaching about how to be saved? Everyone here has already been saved.”

Ephesians 2 is one of the clearest presentations of the gospel anywhere in the Bible. It shows what people are like before they are saved, what they are like after they are saved, and how God saves them. But Paul wasn’t preaching a message to unbelievers; he was writing to Christians. Why would he do this? What value could the gospel be to people who were already saved?

"Gospel" is quite the buzz word today, which is great except that when we use words all the time sometimes we forget what they actually mean! What is the gospel?

Before we get too in depth in this message, it would probably be a good idea to explain what we mean by the word "gospel." The basic meaning of the word gospel is "good news." The gospel is the good news, but it's not just any good news. It's the good news of what God has done for sinful people through Jesus Christ. One of the clearest definitions of the gospel in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Here we find that the gospel is the good news 1) that Christ died for us according to the Scriptures 2) that he was buried 3) that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures 4) that he appeared to multiple, multiple people. These are the basic tenets of the gospel, but the gospel can also include all that God is doing and will do for us in Jesus Christ, for this too is part of the good news for what Christ did for us on the cross!

Structure: [Consider beginning the outlining section by walking your group through the three part division and helping them see the big picture before walking though the main points.]

I. Before Life in Christ: (2:1-3)

Explanation: Twice in these three verses Paul hammers home the reality that those who were now saved **once** used to live ungodly lives. No one is exempt from the description. Everyone who has ever born was born spiritually dead. We are all spiritual stillbirths. As we grow physically, we remain dead spiritually.

Illustration: Zombies fascinate many people today. Whether it be New York Times bestselling books (World War Z, Pride and Prejudice and Zombies), wildly popular TV series shows (Walking Dead, iZombie), video games (Call of Duty Zombies, Plants vs Zombies), or movies (World War Z, I Am Legend, Warm Bodies), our culture is fascinated with the idea that someone could be dead and yet still walking around and acting as if they were alive. While not using these exact descriptions, God's Word pictures those who have not received Christ as spiritual zombies. They walk, talk, and even eat, breath, and sleep. Yet on the inside they are dead. They have no actual life and no relationship with God.

So how exactly do spiritually dead people live? The rest of this passage is an autopsy describing in graphic detail the life of someone who is dead.

A. Believers used to live by the values of the world

Explanation: Paul says that those who are unsaved live according to “the course of this world.” What he means by this is that those who do not have Christ all share a way of thinking about life, a set of values, beliefs, and opinions. Unbelievers share a worldview that, even when not opposing God simply ignores him. All those who do not have Christ think this way, and all of us used to think this way before we accepted Christ.

How does the worldview (way of looking at life) of the world differ from that of believers? In what ways are Christians still tempted to live according to the course of this world.

B. Believers used to live under the control of the devil

Explanation: “The devil made me do it” one comedian used to joke whenever he would find himself in hot water. We as Christians have a hard time taking Scriptural warnings about Satan seriously in a culture where the primary picture of the devil is someone who dresses in red tights, carries a pitchfork, and sits on your shoulder whispering in your ear bad things. But Scripture takes Satan very seriously, and so should you.

If Satan is not omnipresent nor omnipotent, how can unbelievers follow him?

While Satan himself does not tempt believers, he exerts a great amount of control over the world by energizing the world system talked about previously. He also has hordes of evil followers under him to carry out his diabolical schemes (Rev 12:4, 7-9). Sometimes we wish we knew more about how exactly it is that our foe operates. But God has given us all the information we need about him. He is real, and must be taken seriously. The

solution? To fight him with the armor of the Lord, which Paul will get to later in 6:10ff.

C. Believers used to live in the desires of the flesh

Explanation: As he has done elsewhere, Paul heaps up synonyms to make his point here. The word passions has the idea of intense desires, which can be neutral or even good (Luke 22:15; Philippians 1:23), but are often bad or at the very least out of control. The word for “desires” comes from the same word that is used elsewhere for “will” (see 1:5, 9, 11). Our flesh had a will, or wishes, as did our mind, and we obeyed them. This verse is emphasizing the fact that we aren’t just sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners. No one makes you sin. You sin because you want sin, and before Christ you had no choice but to sin.

Salvation gives us a new nature and new desires, yet we still continue to sin. Why is this? How should this affect the way a believer thinks about change?

Illustration: Those who are not saved live under the power of the world, the flesh, and the devil. But that doesn’t bother them; it’s actually quite natural. In Pilgrim’s Progress, the author depicts the main character, Christian, as having a large and heavy bag on his back meant to represent his sin. The more he notices it, the heavier it becomes, yet he is confused by the fact that those around him seem joyfully ignorant of the fact that they all have bags, too. When he asks about how they can tolerate it, they respond with confusion, not noticing or not caring that they are living the way they are. Those who don’t have Christ live sinful lives but don’t seem to be bothered by it, because until God opens the eyes of a person’s heart, they won’t even realize there is something wrong.

Explanation: The final result of this lifestyle is God’s wrath. The expression “children of wrath” does not mean that they were angry people, but rather that they were destined to face God’s wrath. Paul states that this is “by nature,” in other words since birth people have

been bent to live a lifestyle that deserves God's anger. That's the bad news, and it's pretty bad! But the bad news is what makes the good news so wonderful!

Is it helpful for a believer to think about their past sin? How can it be dangerous? How could it be helpful?

II. New Life in Christ (2:4-7)

The word "But" in verse 4 marks a major transition. Paul has been talking about what was the case for believers, now he talks about what is and what will be the case for believers. Most importantly, he tells us *why* it is that God has done all of this for us.

A. Who the God is who gave us new life in Christ.

Explanation: Paul begins by giving the ultimate basis for our salvation – the character of God. God does what he does because he is who he is. God had pity on us in our miserable state because he is rich in mercy and because he has such a great love for us. God's mercy refers to his pity and compassion that keep him from treating us with the immediate judgment we deserve. His love refers to commitment to sacrifice for our good. The character of God is best seen in the gospel. God's mercy and love is so intense that he would sacrifice his own Son for our salvation, which is why Paul describes God's mercy as rich and his love as great!

The greatest demonstration of God's character is seen in the gospel. What other attributes of God can be seen through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus?

B. What God has done to give us new life in Christ.

1. God made us alive with Christ.

Explanation: The illustration of going from death to life is a common one in the New Testament. Life as a gift from God refers to both a better duration (eternal) and a better quality here in the present (cf John 10:10, 28). Sin led to spiritual separation from God, Jesus Christ brought us back into fellowship with God.

2. Christ raised us up with Christ.

Explanation: Our salvation with Christ is often described in terms of resurrection (cf Romans 6:1-5). Romans describes how when Christ died, we died; and now that he lives again, we live with him. Our resurrection with Christ gives us a new nature and breaks the power of sin. It also sets us up to one day inherit all things with Christ (Romans 8:17).

3. Christ seated us in the heavenly places with Christ.

Explanation: How can the author say that we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies, when we are still very much here on earth? Paul sometimes describes future events as past or present (cf Romans 8:30) to point out the certainty of the event. Part of our salvation is still future, where God will save us once and for all from the presence of sin and we will share in the glory of Christ. That future dwelling with him in heaven is so certain that it is put in the present to remind us of the reality of the fact (Philippians 3:20).

All too often, these can be truths that we know with our minds yet struggle to believe with our hearts. As we wake up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, go to bed, and repeat the same cycle hundreds of times it can be hard to believe that we are truly what God says we are. Yet that is the truth of Scripture; it's a reality whether we believe it or not.

Illustration: A thing doesn't have to feel true to be true. I may not feel like a 26 year-old, but I am. I may not feel like I need to eat every day to survive, but I do. Our feelings can deceive us, so we have to stick with what's true, even if it feels wrong.

C. Why God has given us new life in Christ.

Explanation: God's purpose in doing all of this is that in the coming ages (the millennium and the eternal state) he could lavish us with all of his grace and demonstrate to all creation how

incredibly gracious and kind God is to those who have accepted Christ. God's gracious kindness to us is primarily about him showing his character and revealing his glory (1:6, 12, 14; 3:20-21). God does all things to glorify himself, but the center of his self-glorification comes as he treats us as we are in Christ and not as we are of ourselves.

What dangers follow if we forget that the gospel is first and foremost about the glory of God and not the glory of man?

III. How to Go from Death to Life (2:8-10)

A. Salvation is by grace.

Explanation: Grace refers to God's divine favor towards us. It means that God treats us well when he should destroy us. God's grace is, by definition, undeserved. Nothing you do can earn more of God's grace, because then it would not be grace. This means that all the good things God does for us says everything about him and nothing about us. We don't deserve our salvation or the many blessings that accompany it, but God gives them to us because that is his nature. Everything good that God does for us he does because of his own character, not because of our worth.

B. Salvation is through faith.

Explanation: God's part in salvation is grace, and ours is faith.

C. Salvation is not by works.

Explanation: During the Reformation one of the great spiritual truths to be reemphasized was the truth of justification through faith **alone**. The Catholic church believed in justification by grace through faith, but that grace had to be "developed" through works. Luther and others began rightly emphasizing that works can play no part in salvation, because if our works play any part, we can boast! Yet the whole point of the gospel is glorify and magnify God!

Have you ever heard a Catholic give a convincing testimony? It may be possible for some who describe themselves as “Catholic” to be genuinely saved, but how can you know whether a Catholic believes what the Bible teaches about salvation?

D. Salvation is unto good works.

Explanation: Salvation begins by grace through faith, and that is how it continues. We continue to need God's grace and we continue to be called upon to take God at his Word. But once we are saved, we are called upon to show good works. These works are not the **basis** of salvation, but they are the **fruit** of it. In other words, faith don't lead **to** salvation but they do lead **out** of it (Philippians 2:12).

James talks about the importance of right living (James 2:14ff), as does John (1 John 1:5-10), and Peter (1 Peter 1:14-21). Peter in particular ties our good works firmly to the gospel. Why should we live holy? Because we have been bought back by the blood of Jesus. All Scripture testifies to the fact that our good works cannot and never will save us, but they should flow out of a saving relationship with God.

Conclusion: “I am not what I ought to be, but thank God I’m not what I used to be. I am what I am by the grace of God.”

Believers need to be reminded of the gospel just as unbelievers. Nothing will empty you of your pride yet fill you with confidence quite like the gospel. Nothing will show you your need and yet give you hope like the gospel. Nothing will crush your self-importance, your self-dependence, and your self-worth while at the same time bringing untold joy and peace and satisfaction quite like the gospel. Reminding yourself that Christ suffered and bled and died and rose again for you should give you the motivation and strength to live for God. Meditating on where we've been and where God is taking us and how he's chosen to do it all should make us glory in the great God we have and empower us to humbly, dependently live for him.