

Advent 2024: Love – Ephesians 2:1-10

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Date: 22 December 2024

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[0:00] Good morning, and there we go. Merry Christmas. I'm very excited to be gathered with you all to consider the Advent theme of love. It is a joy for me to be filling the pulpit today.

Those of you who know me well know that I am a big Christmas enthusiast. I celebrate Christmas from about March until about mid-January. I really appreciate all the themes that personify Advent truths in the winter season and some of the traditions we participate in.

I think that if we're going to celebrate Advent, it is helpful to let our festivities be responsive to what we are celebrating. This can amplify our meditations.

For instance, the trees outside are barren, but there is an evergreen inside the house that never dies. The winter seems to linger as we anticipate the second coming of the spring.

In the meantime, it is cold outside, but there is a warmth around the hearth of Christ. And as the world anticipated God giving us the gift of Christ, we simulate an anticipation of gift-giving on Christmas Day.

[1:11] Our physical experience can complement our spiritual experience to increase our enjoyment and recognition of Christ's Advent, but none of these are to be over-spiritualized or taken as authoritative.

Celebrating Christmas has really waxed and waned over throughout history, so we ought to be cautious that we aren't giving into traditionalism this season. But Scripture does not prescribe these modern cultural rituals and ever explicitly makes these connections.

But nonetheless, with the right heart posture, celebrating Christ's Advent can be done well. With that said, it is the last sermon before our Christmas Eve service, and we are considering God's love. In light of Christ's incarnation, what makes this gift of Jesus such a preeminent act of love? It is not simply that there was a miraculous conception.

The conception of Jesus is really significant because it displays the power of God over all living things. But there is a much grander reality here that puts God's love on display.

[2:15] To understand and experience the act of love I'm talking about, we are going to consider Ephesians 2 today. As Reformed Baptists, most of us are familiar with Ephesians 1.

Ephesians 1 is a beautiful and a glorious scripture on how our sovereign God predestined those who would be recipients of spiritual riches in Christ. And this is termed the unconditional election doctrine from Calvin's doctrines of grace, or TULIP.

But in the second half of the chapter, Paul prays that the Spirit will open the eyes of their hearts to see the immeasurable greatness of his power toward believers. And then Paul goes on to reveal a bit of this mystery in chapter 2 as he shows us how or why it is so immeasurably great.

So before we get into our text, I want to present a framework in thinking through the kind of love that God has for his people and the immeasurable power God employs because of his great love.

We often think of love as a transaction. When we love someone or something, it is because the object of our love is attractive to us, even though we make sacrifices for the things we love.

[3:30] It is still selfish to some extent. There is a reciprocal benefit to ourselves. We love watching childhood Christmas movies because they make us feel nostalgic.

They're fun. We love eating honey-baked ham because it makes our taste buds happy and our bellies full. There is a desirable quality about the objects of our love. God's love is unique and mysterious in that he has a completely selfless love for his people.

He is not in it for personal gain. And furthermore, our love for one another is limited in power. God's love is unique in its outward focus, but it is also the greatest love fathomable because it satisfies the greatest need of the ones he loves at the greatest cost to himself.

We may have love for others and meet some practical needs, but we are limited in what we can offer. Within Ephesians 2, we are going to see this principle drawn out to the greatest extent. Christ overwhelmingly fills the greatest need to those who deserve it the least at the greatest cost to himself.

All right, so our main text today is Ephesians 2, 1 through 10. And we're going to be breaking this down in three chunks. The first being verses 1 through 3, the unloveliness of man.

[4:47] And then verse 4, the love of God. And then verses 5 through 10, loved in Christ. Okay, so let's start with Ephesians, or with verses 1 through 3.

Paul just described in chapter 1 his prayer and encouragement for the Ephesians and concluded with a beautiful doxology of the supremacy of Christ. And then he says this, 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.

In these first three verses, we see our first point, the unloveliness of man. Paul emphasized God's unconditional election in chapter 1.

Now he's describing the total depravity of mankind. And when you consider these doctrines together, they not only make logical sense, but through them, you see just how emphatic the love of God is.

We can't fully understand God's total loving power until you understand man's depravity. And again, that is really what I hope to do today, is to draw out the gravity of God's provision in Christ.

[6:25] So Paul is starting to justify that claim he made in chapter 1, verse 19, about God's immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe. So verse 1 depicts the spiritual state of the natural man as dead.

And you are dead in the trespasses and sins. In the scriptures, there are many ways God describes our spiritual status without Christ. We are blind, deaf, sick, slaves, strangers, alienated, but here we are dead.

The natural man, the person without the spirit of God is dead. Holy night speaks of a sin and error pining, but Paul says it's not just that we are pining or withering away, we are already dead.

I and a number of you have had the misfortune of witnessing death. Some of you have been pallbearers, some work in the ER, some have experienced tragic life events firsthand, but most of us have not had to experience death this intimately.

Our society today attempts to white glove the reality of death. We make softer terms for it, like passing away or no longer with us.

[7:40] We have hospitals and crematories, morgues and other institutions now that handle the dirty work for us. We visit a dying person at the hospital and say our final goodbyes, and then a week later, we have an urn of ashes.

We never really have to interact directly with death. In Paul's day, they did not have these conveniences. Most people were much more familiar with death. When this text says dead, I'm sure many of the Ephesians could recall a personal example of seeing or even handling the body of a dead person.

People died at home and the family had to wield a shovel and dig a hole and place that body in that hole. Paul is setting up this analogy between physical death and the spiritual state of mankind to help capture the severity of our condition.

Physically, there's nothing that a dead person can do to resuscitate themselves. They are hopeless in and of themselves. If someone stops breathing or their heart stops pumping, they require another person to perform CPR or hookup in AED.

The spiritually dead person is likewise cold and animate and with no ability to revive itself.

Obviously, our bodies are alive, so this death is a spiritual one.

[8:59] We are dead to righteousness, and therefore, we are dead to a good standing with our Heavenly Father. Because we cannot fulfill the righteous requirement of the law, we find ourselves condemned before a holy God.

Romans 2.13 says, For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law will be justified. So in order to be justified, we must be doers of righteousness. Unfortunately, in Romans 3, the author explains that there is none righteous, no, not one. So we are dead to righteousness. This means that we don't perform some righteous things. It means we can't do any righteous deeds apart from Christ. And while we may perform some morally good acts, Romans tells us that anything not done in faith is sin. It is not righteous. The deeds of our flesh are not done for the right reason. They are not done in faith for the glory of God. If we are not justified before God, then judgment is due because of our trespasses and sin.

[10:19] This judgment means we will be forever separated from God in eternity. In and of ourselves, we can do nothing to gain favor with God. So we are not physically dead and somehow we can walk.

So what does this look like to be dead men walking? For starters, in verse 2, it says that we do have a spirit at work within us, but it is not of God. It is a dark force within and around us that causes us to wander about seeking to indulge the passions of our flesh, somewhat like spiritual zombies. Our natural kingdom under the influence of the prince of the power of the air is in the atmosphere of carnality. As long as the prince has his way, we will follow him to death. A path disguised by the gratification of our flesh until the nails are driven into our spiritual coffins. David Guzik says this, a dead man feels comfortable in his coffin. In the same way, when we were spiritually dead, we felt comfortable in trespasses and sins. Satan is the great deceiver. He will use every resource the Lord permits him to use to try and entice our flesh.

[11:36] He will often try to make you feel justified and satisfied in your sin. So be cautious that you are not putting your hope in your own works because it can feel good to get rewards from the world and success in your affairs.

This is a false hope. Satan will put this imaginary carrot before your eyes until you find yourself in eternal ruin, away from the presence of the Lord and away from the glory of his might.

Without Christ, this is our fate. We are enslaved to sin. We follow and submit to the prince of the power of the air. We reject God for who he is, the real king. The underwhelming title given to the person in this state is a son of disobedience and child of wrath.

We have inherited disobedience from our first parents. Like our first mother, Eve, who saw that the tree was a delight to the eyes and desired to make one wise, she took of it and ate. God promised that the day we ate of it, we would surely die.

That death, promised in Genesis, was both a promise of physical death and spiritual death. On that day, they were separated from God because of their unrighteous disobedience and they would no longer live forever.

[12:47] Death now has spread to all men because all sinned. We would not nor could not choose otherwise. It is who we are naturally from birth.

We follow Satan just like our parents. As birds fly, man's natural condition is sinful. We were naturally enslaved to sin, following Satan and participating in his works.

We declared ourselves to be gods by ignoring the Lord's decrees and obeying our own will and the will of the devil. This is a spiritual corruption which demands spiritual justice, which is what the children of wrath will get as their inheritance.

The willful transgressions that we commit merit the judgment of God because it is breaking of God's law of which the Lord will execute his wrath. Verse 3 goes on to tell us that this is our life.

We lived in the passions of our flesh. We loved it. It was our passion. We're not only by nature in this condition but it is a willing pursuit of gratifying our fleshly desires.

[13:50] It is eerie how common, accepted, and subtle that sin can be. But don't be deceived. The sin we possess is ugly and nasty.

It's rebellious, deceiving, and it's morally wrong. It causes children to lie to their parents. It causes brothers to bully their sisters or for sisters to steal from their brothers.

It causes husbands to be disloyal to their wives, whether in person or virtually. It causes wives to envy other marriages. It causes fathers to abdicate their duty as spiritual leader of the home.

And for mothers to complain about those little souls that the Lord has entrusted them to steward. Roommates bicker over who does or doesn't do the dishes. People murder and steal.

Body, image, anxiety, pride, and physical performance. Trusting that money will satisfy us.

Complaining about our circumstances. All envy, boasting, pride, addiction, disorder, hate, deceit.

[14:56] It is all because of our condition of sin. And furthermore, the stain of sin runs deep. We carry out the comprehensive desires of both body and mind.

Our sin nature is not simply outward in action. It also takes place in our mind. For instance, everyone who hates his brother is a murderer. And everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her.

We are not just partially depraved in our bodies. We are totally depraved throughout in body and mind. Even though our sin may be less outwardly harming when it is concealed inside the mind, God sees and he knows the inward thoughts.

Those inward sins also merit the due sentence of law-breaking. We all once lived like the rest of mankind denotes that all humankind starts this way.

Physically alive, spiritually dead, we are overall unlovely and without the ability to revive ourselves spiritually. We are unrighteous and desperately need to be justified.

[16:08] We are at enmity with God and desperately need to be reconciled. We are dead and desperately need to live. So this is the first half of considering the severity of God's love in Christ by understanding the severity of our need for him.

We will suffer the eternal and just punishment of God as lawbreakers. We miss out on the joy and honor of knowing God personally as Abba Father. We have a very great need to alter this outcome. It is a matter of eternal life and death. So throughout verses 1 through 3, we may have a faint hope in our hearts as Paul speaks in the past tense, but it is overall gloomy and discouraging as we are reminded of our depravity.

Our heads start to drop in defeat until verse 4. In verse 4, we will see our second point, the love of God burst onto the scene.

It reads, but God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us.

[17:23] On a clean and sharp break into verse 4, we have a reason to lift our heads. Our ear catches a slight burst of hope in that three-letter conjunction, but. We are like the rest of mankind, except.

Like the first blooms in springtime, we anticipate a coming turn of events. The winter is coming to a close and a new day is dawning. But what?

The noun following the conjunction backs up and reaffirms the hope we start to sense. The noun is God. The unfailing, promise-keeping, truth-telling, life-giving being who has power and authority over all things has something to interject.

This God is the one who does not disappoint as the things of this earth disappoints. He is not like the Christmas Eve dinner that fills us for a time and then we hunger again. He is not our fading youth that allows us to be productive and sharp for a while.

He is not uncertain like a house that has potential to burn down or flood. He is not like our earthly parents or our best friend or our spouse that will fail us at times. He will not desert those whom he loves.

[18:34] He says that he is with us always to the end of the age and God has no higher name to which he can swear by so when he gives a promise it's good as done. He can create something from nothing.

He is from eternity past and will be until eternity future. He never grows weary or hungry. Time and space do not affect him. If we are to have hope in anyone to rescue us from our grave spiritual condition it is the great I am.

So we have here but God but God has something perhaps change this reality and outcome of her depravity from verses 1 through 3 but what is it?

It is his agape love being rich in mercy because of his great love with which he loved us. This is a significant word here because the word for love is different from the other words translated to love in the Bible.

I'm sure a lot of you are familiar with that. It is not eros which is marital love it is not philia brotherly love and it is not storge familial love it is not based on affection or feelings as you might love eating gingerbread cookies and watching Home Alone 2 it is also not based on obligation like paying a debt it is a sacrificial and committed and confirmed love that says despite your unloveliness I love you true agape love doesn't say to the beggar go and be warmed it actually ensures the good outcome of its object it is an authentic sympathy that will achieve the well-being of its recipient or die trying additionally this mercy that God bestows on his people has to be based on God's love it is because of the great love with which he loved us whatever this exchange is or whatever it is going to be it makes no sense in and of itself there is not going to be any economical benefit for God in this deal and he is the one initiating it for instance if I purchase a red rider air rifle for \$100 that is a fair trade money for a gun it doesn't take love to make that purely economical transaction now if I gift that red rider to my son for free this requires an amount of love to be present because I get no economical return from it because I love my son I give him this free gift and this may even be less than free because I'm risking a trip to the

[21:06] ER if he shoots his eye out because we bring nothing to the bargaining table indeed we cannot there has to be an amount of love mercy and grace on God's part this is an unfair trade and it should cause us to stand in awe at the mystery of God's love this rich mercy that is lavished upon us has to be founded on his own attribute of love because it makes no sense otherwise this is the unique kind of love that God has in fact scripture says that God is this kind of love the attribute of loving your enemy is not natural to man it is foreign to anything that man could have conceived it originates from God he is the source God is not just loving but God is love look at chapter 3 really quick chapter 3 and verse 14 to kind of explain this a little bit more Paul says for this reason I bow my knees before the father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith

Christ dwelling in your hearts through faith that you being rooted and grounded in agape may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the agape of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God so what does it mean that we can know the love of Christ and yet it surpasses knowledge what means without Christ it is unfathomable to know this kind of love it comes from above when the love of Christ dwells in your heart through faith then you are rooted and grounded in that agape and it gives you the strength to comprehend the dimensional and measurable love of God it is otherwise foreign to man God loved us God is the subject acting on the direct object Paul tells us that he has bestowed his love on us this love is something tangible and effectual he has an abundance of mercy that he somehow has imparted to us in love we know that we need rich mercy because we by nature are so spiritually poor this verse is so powerful it comes upon a midnight clear like the angels to the shepherds in Luke 2 the bleak reality of ourselves from verses 1-3 are dark and cold like the night but all of a sudden the angels appeared to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord shone around them they haven't even relayed what the good news is yet but it invoked a deep response from within the shepherds verse 4 is the burst of light emanating from the glory of God that stirs a deep expectant heart response within us it's the great turning point in our salvation story as it was in human history because it speaks of a great power we offer nothing but God offers rich mercy because of his great love but God has loved us with his agape love now the ears of our heart are fully engaged as we continue to read we can't help but continue to know how God has loved us and what the conclusion of that love might be the conclusion given in 5 through 10 which is our third and final point being loved in Christ will overwhelmingly resolve all the problems presented in verses 1 through 3 so hark the herald

Paul here from verse 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses God 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 and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus for by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing it is the gift of God not a result of works that no one may boast for we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them oh tidings of comfort and joy by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone in glory to God in the highest alone this sweet news is not explicit about what Christ did to save us but the rest of

Ephesians is a little more descriptive chapter 1 verse says that we have redemption through his blood and then in chapter 2 verse 13 we have been brought near by the blood of Christ and again chapter 5 verse 2 Christ loved us and gave himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God and then verse!

[26:18] 25 chapter 5 Christ loved God removes our sin from our identity as far as the east is from the west it is immeasurable his agape love is bestowed on us in Christ this illuminates how the love of God spans that eternal gulf in between our natural standing and our current standing we see more clearly that this grace is immeasurable the ultimate gift paid at the ultimate cost purchased by him who had the least obligation to pay it Christ Jesus humbly born as a baby in a manger so that he might give his life as a ransom for many God the father sacrificed this only begotten son Christ that we would be reconciled to him he poured!

his mercy so that is how Christ procured the gifts we see in 5 through 10 and interwoven throughout the description of the gifts which meet the eternal needs we have presented in 1 through 3 is a theme of grace and humility this humility is the natural and right response we ought to have because our greatest need being saved from eternity in hell and to a right standing with God has been met it is the greatest gift we could ever wish for and has been granted and what did we do to deserve this nothing we were dead in our trespasses and sins meaning we could not merit any gift from God but God made us alive it was a complete and gracious act of God verse five answers verse one you are dead but because of

God's love we're made alive remember that it requires someone outside of ourselves to resuscitate or revive our souls Christ is the AED that shocks us into life we were the ones being saved we did not and could not save ourselves some of you have heard preachers speak of God's plea for the sinner to come answer the door of salvation that God is knocking on if only we would let him in we could be saved it depends on you there ain't nobody coming to the door there's a dead man inside God needs to kick down the door and perform a spiritual!

miracle God is not so weak in power that he depends on our permission we were dead there's no permission to give to him there's no heartbeat no blood pumping no lungs breathing we needed a miracle and that is exactly what God has done the great physician has risen the dead to life through faith in Christ he surgically!

removed the heart of stone and gave us a heart of flesh! grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing not as a result of anything we did or didn't do we aren't so lovely and honorable that God ought to do this there was nothing about us that God thought you know they have been so good I'll give them a second chance no we were dead by grace you have been saved Paul repeats that twice here no one may boast because it was a complete act of God when we try to claim credit for our salvation we are attempting to rob God of his glory and bringing the dead to life it would be like waking up in a hospital after a fatal car accident and telling everyone how you installed your own IVs and stitched together your wounds and performed!

[30:24] spinal surgery to yourself I don't think Adam and Eve after eating the fruit we deserve much worse than coal in our stocking we ran from God our iniquities had made a separation between us and God and our sins had hidden his face from us so that he does not hear but God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us made us alive together with Christ praise the Lord so we have Christ Jesus after our Lord was sacrificed he did not stay down he alone holds power over death because he alone is the almighty he is the one who creates life death had nothing to hold against Christ to bind him in the grave there's no justified accusation against him he was the perfect and righteous son

of man therefore he was able to be raised from the tomb in his death he consumed the wrath of

God we deserved and buried it in that grave never to be awakened again then he ascended to the right hand of the father his seat now is there in the heavenly places and when we are found in him his identity becomes our identity our kingdom that we reside in is now in the heavenly places we don't sit in the seat of scoffers we sit around the royal table of the messiah this is in contrast to the course of this world where the figurehead is the prince of the power we now have new identities because we are of a different people a holy nation we're a royal priesthood a people for his own possession now in Christ we are alive to righteousness you however are not in the flesh!

but in the spirit if in fact the spirit of God dwells in you anyone who does not have the spirit of Christ does not belong to him but if Christ is in you although the body is dead because of sin the spirit is life because of righteousness if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who dwells in you converted born again Christians are alive in the righteousness of Christ and that same power that rose Christ from the grave has given you life we are now dead to sin and alive to righteousness seated with Christ in the heavenly places this seat comes with great privileges it is in contrast to living in the passions of our flesh!

which ultimately leave us dissatisfied and broken we are seated in the heavenly places so that in the coming ages throughout the throughout every age going forward throughout the ages God shows us the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus we have boldness and confident access to God through our faith in Christ when we now sin we have a mediator as we repent of our sins we are forgiven because Christ intercedes for us this is an immeasurable kindness furthermore he always lends his ear to his children and he comforts them he is always with us our trials and sufferings work to sanctify us for God's glory and our good the world no longer has to be feared because Christ has overcome the world if we are to live we live for Christ if we are to die death is gain neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor death nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of

God in Christ Jesus our Lord we are not called to comfort but rather faithfulness as we obey the Lord we may be persecuted and we may be disciplined!

[34:27] knowing the compassion the comfort the security and the rest found in our sovereign powerful loving God and we get to experience the immeasurable riches of his grace day after day throughout the ages so those are many of the privileges of being seated in the heavenly places but we have also been recreated no longer are we sons of disobedience or children of wrath our new inheritance is the throne of Christ we are created in Christ Jesus we are his workmanship now as such we walk in newness of life we get to walk in the path of the righteous the good works that we do as a result of being saved are good and they are a joy it is not burdensome but delightful because it is ultimately for our good God doesn't prescribe these good works because he is insecure and just needs someone to obey him these works are for our good they protect us from spiritual harm we are given to spiritual anger depression and loneliness and all sorts of terrible things but the new works we are created for bear comfort and joy

God are however expected of God children we are not saved by them by our good works don't be mistaken but being saved we will do good works it is the spiritual litmus test God prepares these good works beforehand that we should walk in them when a king was introduced someone used to go before him and rolled out the royal carpet that he should walk down that path God likewise has prepared us a path to walk it is the path of good works that we should walk in them the end of this path is the presence of the Lord one day we will no longer see in a mirror dimly lit but we will stand face to face with God there will be no need for a sun to shine because he himself will be our light what a day that will be it's all because Christ came and accomplished the task what was started in the little town of

Bethlehem will end in a glorious new Jerusalem with city walls of Jasper and streets of gold where our Savior will be with us so why is our advent of Christ such a preeminent act of love it was not just

a miraculous conception our Savior was born God took on flesh to rescue people who were dead he ransomed captive Israel enslaved to sin enemies of God dead in our trespasses and sins God came to us to save us he had to come to earth in order to fulfill the requirement of righteousness so that in him we could be justified because of the great love with which he loved us he paid the ultimate price for people who deserved it the least to gift us the utmost valuable riches by grace you have been saved by grace you have been given life everlasting

God loved us and gave us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places my only application to this is to praise God in humility beholding the mystery of his love that he bestowed on dead sinners in Christ I'm going to end by reading the lyrics of joyful joyful we adore thee I hope it rings anew for you as you might sing it this season joyful joyful we adore you God of glory Lord of love hearts unfold like flowers before you opening to the sun above melt the clouds of sin and sadness drive the dark of doubt away giver of immortal gladness fill us with the light of day all your works with joy surround you earth and heaven reflect your rays stars and angels sing around you center of unbroken praise field and forest veil and mountain flowery meadow flashing sea chanting bird and flowing fountain praising you eternally always giving and forgiving ever blessing ever blessed wellspring of the joy of living ocean depth of happy rest loving father christ our brother let your light upon us shine teach us how to love each other let us lift us to the joy divine mortals join the mighty chorus which the morning stars began god's own love is reigning over us join the people hand in hand ever singing march we onward victors in the midst of strife joyful music leads us sunward in the triumph song of life let's pray