

How God Rescues Us



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 2:1–10, Eph. 5:14, Rom. 5:17, Eph. 5:6, 2 Tim. 1:7.*

Memory Text: “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” (*Ephesians 2:4, 5, ESV*).

On October 14, 1987, eighteen-month-old Jessica McClure was playing in her aunt’s backyard when she fell twenty-two feet into an abandoned well. Her plight attracted media from around the world to Midland, Texas. A global audience watched “Baby Jessica” sleeping, crying, singing, and calling out for her mother. They watched as emergency workers piped fresh air down the well.

Finally, fifty-eight hours after Jessica’s fall, the worldwide audience watched as Jessica was released from the eight-inch well casing that had trapped her for more than two days. Photographer Scott Shaw’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph captured the moment: a rescue cable bisects the worried faces of Jessica’s rescuers looking down at the bandaged bundle at the heart of the drama, Baby Jessica.

There’s nothing quite as gripping as a good rescue story, and Paul, in Ephesians 2:1–10, gives us an up-close-and-personal view of the grandest, most sweeping rescue mission of all time—God’s efforts to redeem humanity. The drama of the story is heightened by knowing that we are not mere spectators of someone else’s rescue but witnesses of our own.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 22.

Once Dead and Deceived by Satan

Read Ephesians 2:1–10. What is the main idea that Paul is giving us here about what Jesus has done for us?

Paul has already described the salvation given to Christians (*Eph. 1:3–14, 15–23*) and told, in brief, the story of the believers in Ephesus (*Eph. 1:13*). In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul will now tell their conversion story in more detail, with a more personal focus. He contrasts their past, sinful existence (*Eph. 2:1–3*) with the blessings of God's salvation, which he portrays as a participation in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ (*Eph. 2:4–7*), and he celebrates the basis of that salvation in the grace and creative work of God (*Eph. 2:8–10*).

These three sections of the passage are summarized neatly in the phrases of Ephesians 2:5: (1) “we were dead in our trespasses”; (2) God “made us alive together with Christ”; (3) “by grace you have been saved” (*ESV*).

In Ephesians 2:1, 2, Paul underlines the sad reality of the pre-conversion existence of his audience by noting that they were spiritually dead, practicing trespasses and sins as their regular pattern of life (*Eph. 2:1*), and were dominated by Satan (*Eph. 2:2*). Since Paul writes to living people, he refers to them as once “dead” in a metaphorical sense (*compare Eph. 5:14*). However, their plight was very real and dire since they were once separated from God, the Source of life (*compare Col. 2:13, Rom. 5:17, Rom. 6:23*).

Reflecting on the past lives of his hearers, Paul identifies two external forces that dominated them. The first of these is “the course of this world” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*)—the customs and behavior in the wider society of Ephesus that misshaped human life into rebellion against God.

Satan is described in two ways as the second external force that dominated their prior existence. He is “the prince of the power of the air” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*) since “the air” (or “the heavenly places”) is identified as the location of supernatural powers, including evil ones (*compare Eph. 1:3, Eph. 3:10, Eph. 6:12*). Also, he is active on earth since he is “the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (*Eph. 2:2, NKJV*).

What do these verses teach about the reality of the great controversy? At the same time, how can we draw comfort and hope in the knowledge that Jesus has been victorious and that we can share in His victory now?

Once Deluded by Our Own Desires

“All of us also lived among them [the disobedient] at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath” (*Eph. 2:3, NIV*).

Apart from the intervention of God, human existence is dominated not only by the external forces mentioned in Ephesians 2:2 but also by internal ones: “the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*; compare *James 1:14, 15; 1 Pet. 1:14*).

What does Paul mean by stating that his hearers were once “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*)? Compare *Ephesians 2:3* and *Ephesians 5:6*.

The present reality of a lost life is distressing enough, but its last-day implications are more frightening still. Human beings, being “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*) stand under the threat of God’s judgment at the end of time.

The phrase “by nature children of wrath” points to another daunting reality, as well. While still bearers of the image of God, we have come to understand that there is something deeply awry in us. Living the Christian life, then, is not just a matter of conquering a bad habit or two or overcoming whatever “trespasses and sins” (*Eph. 2:1*) are currently threatening. We do not just contend with *sins* but with *sin*. We are bent toward rebellion against God and toward self-destruction. Humans, by default, are caught in a pattern of self-destructive, sinful behavior, following the dictates of Satan (*Eph. 2:2*) and our own innate, sinful desires (*Eph. 2:3*). Believers once were “by nature the children of wrath.”

It is important to note that Paul employs a past tense—we “were by nature the children of wrath” (*Eph. 2:3*). This does not mean that an inherent bent toward evil is no longer a reality for believers. Paul spends a considerable portion of his letter (*Ephesians 4:17–5:21*) warning that sinful acts, rooted in a sinful nature, remain a threat for Christians. It does mean, though, that this “old self” need no longer dominate the believer, who through the power of Christ can “put off your old self” and “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (*Eph. 4:22–24, ESV*).

Who hasn’t experienced just how corrupted our own nature is, even after we have given ourselves to Jesus? What should this teach us about how important it is that we cling to Him every moment of our lives?

Now Resurrected, Ascended, and Exalted With Christ

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us” (*Eph. 2:4, NKJV*). Here, with two powerful words, “But God,” Paul pivots from his doleful portrait of the past lives of his audience (*Eph. 2:1–3*) to the new, hope-filled realities that mark their lives as believers (*Eph. 2:4–10*).

In what sense do believers participate in Christ’s resurrection, ascension, and exaltation? When does this participation occur? *Eph. 2:6, 7.*

We have noted that Ephesians is a Christ-drenched letter highlighting the solidarity of believers with Christ. In Ephesians 2:5 and 6, Paul extends this theme by deploying three compound verbs to unleash the stunning truth that, through God’s initiatives, believers themselves participate in important salvation history events that center on the Messiah, Jesus.

Believers are (1) co-resurrected with Christ; (2) co-raised up with Christ (which Paul probably uses to indicate the participation of believers in Christ’s ascension to heaven); and (3) co-seated with Christ “in the heavenly places,” meaning that believers participate in Christ’s “seating” on the throne of the cosmos. They are co-exalted with Jesus.

To appreciate the power of Paul’s argument, we must look back to Ephesians 1:19–23 and recall that in His death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation, Christ gains the victory over all evil and spiritual powers, the very ones who once dominated the lives of believers. In the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus, these powers—though still active and threatening to human existence—have been thoroughly superseded. The cosmos has shifted. Reality has changed. Believers are not mere spectators to these events but are personally and intimately involved in them. That we are co-resurrected, co-ascended, and co-exalted with Jesus opens up a whole new array of possibilities for us. We have the right to turn from a demon-dominated existence to a life of spiritual abundance and power in Christ (*2 Tim. 1:7*).

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (*2 Tim. 1:7, NKJV*). How do the verses we looked at today help us understand what Paul writes here?

Now Blessed Forever by Grace

Compare God's planning for salvation in Ephesians 1:3, 4 with the eternal results of that plan described in Ephesians 2:7. What are essential elements and goals of God's "plan of salvation"?

Graduation ceremonies are wonderful celebrations, whether for kindergarten or a PhD. A graduation marks an important accomplishment, the move to a different stage of life or career. It is important for us as believers to understand a profound truth of the gospel: we never graduate from grace. There is never a celebration that we have attained our PhD in grace or graduated from our need of it.

Paul affirms this truth in Ephesians 2:7, accenting it with an expansive chronology. God has acted in the past in Christ to redeem us, so identifying us with His Son, Jesus Christ, that we are in the present coparticipants in His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation (*Eph. 2:4–6*). God's plan, though, does not end with a grace-filled past and a mercy-bathed present. God's plan, rooted in divine councils in time immemorial (*Eph. 1:4*), stretches forever into the future. It includes all "the coming ages" (*Eph. 2:7, ESV*). His plan for the eternal future is founded on the same principle as His actions in the past and present—the principle of grace. "In the coming ages," God looks forward to demonstrating "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (*Eph. 2:7, ESV*).

Paul thinks of God's grace as a treasure or fortune of unfathomable value (*compare Eph. 1:7, Eph. 3:8*) from which believers may draw to meet any need. This grand generosity of God toward us becomes an eloquent, ageless, and cosmic exhibit of His grace.

"By coming to dwell with us, Jesus was to reveal God both to men and to angels. . . . But not alone for His earthborn children was this revelation given. Our little world is the lesson book of the universe. God's wonderful purpose of grace, the mystery of redeeming love, is the theme into which 'angels desire to look,' and it will be their study throughout endless ages. Both the redeemed and the unfallen beings will find in the cross of Christ their science and their song. It will be seen that the glory shining in the face of Jesus is the glory of self-sacrificing love."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 19, 20.

Now Saved by God

Read back through Ephesians 2:1–10, focusing on Paul’s conclusion in verses 8–10. What points does he highlight as he concludes the passage?

In Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul documents that the salvation of the believers in Ephesus does not occur because of their good behavior or winsome qualities. When the story begins, they are spiritually dead. There’s not a spark of life or worth in them (*Eph. 2:1*). They have been utterly conquered by sin (*Eph. 2:1*). They exhibit no personal initiative but are led around by Satan himself and by their own base passions and mental delusions (*Eph. 2:2, 3*).

Unknown to them, they are in a far worse position than simply being without spiritual life or virtue. In company with all humankind, they are the enemies of the true God and are moving toward a day of destiny and divine judgment. They are “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (*Eph. 2:3, ESV*).

Instead of being rooted in their own qualities, their salvation is rooted in God’s inexplicable love—a love that cannot be explained based on any worth in the object of that love. In mercy and love, God acts on their behalf in Christ Jesus (*Eph. 2:4*), resurrecting them from spiritual death. Because of God’s intervention, they experience an amazing itinerary that follows the trajectory of Jesus Himself. From the extreme depth of utter spiritual death and grinding slavery, they are resurrected and conveyed to the “heavenly places” and seated with Christ on the cosmic throne (*Eph. 2:5, 6*). This lightning-like, divine intervention, though, is no momentary phenomenon. It has real staying power, eternal durability, because God intends to exhibit His grace toward them in Christ Jesus throughout all eternity (*Eph. 2:7*).

In his conclusion to Ephesians 2:1–10 (*Eph. 2:8–10*), Paul goes back over this ground, wishing to ensure that his point sticks: the salvation of believers is a divine work, not a human one. It does not originate in us but in God’s gift. No human being can boast of having sparked it (*Eph. 2:8, 9*). Standing in the grace of God, we believers are exhibits of His grace, and only of His grace. We are His masterpieces, created by God “in Christ Jesus” (*Eph. 2:10*).

Why is it so important for us to understand that our salvation is from God and is not rooted in our own worth or efforts?

Further Thought: Underlying the Epistle to the Ephesians is a story that is often rehearsed in part or alluded to in it. The major events in the narrative are the following:

1. God's choice of the people "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4, 5, 11*).
2. Their past, lost existence (*Eph. 2:1–3, 11, 12; Eph. 4:17–19, 22; Eph. 5:8*).
3. The intervention of God in Christ to save them (*Eph. 1:7, 8; Eph. 2:4–6, 13–19; Eph. 4:1, 20, 21; Eph. 5:2, 8, 23, 25, 26*).
4. Their acceptance of the gospel (*Eph. 1:12, 13 and implied elsewhere*). Having once "no hope" (*Eph. 2:12*), they now possess the "one hope" toward which believers move (*Eph. 4:4; compare Eph. 1:18*).
5. The present lives of the addressees as disciples. Though living at a time fraught with hazards and the opposition of the evil powers, they may draw on the resources offered by their exalted Lord (*Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:6, Eph. 3:14–21, Eph. 4:7–16, Eph. 6:10–20*).
6. In the future culmination of history, the Spirit's role as "guarantee" (*Eph. 1:13, 14, ESV*), or "seal" (*Eph. 4:30*), reaches fruition. In this crowning moment, the addressees will be rewarded for their faithfulness by taking possession of the "inheritance" already granted to them in Christ (*Eph. 2:7; Eph. 6:8, 9*); and, through their faith in Christ, they will be granted a place in the Christ-centered age to come (*Eph. 1:21; Eph. 2:7, 19–22; Eph. 4:13, 15; Eph. 5:27*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1** The underlying story of Ephesians (see above) is not just the story of believers in the first century. It is our own story. Which of the major steps or stages of that story gives you the most hope in this moment?
- 2** Why do you think it is that Paul so frequently recalls the sinful past of his audience, inviting them to reflect on their pre-conversion lives?
- 3** Compare Paul's summary of the gospel in Ephesians 2:8–10 to his earlier summary in Romans 1:16, 17. What similar themes emerge? In what ways are the two different?
- 4** While the good works of believers play no role in their redemption, in that they can never give people saving merit before God, what important part do they play in God's plans for believers? *Eph. 2:10.*

Terrified in Russia: Part 1

By ANDREW MCCHESNEY

Unusual events began occurring at home after 16-year-old Almira signed up for courses on the supernatural in the Russian republic of Bashkortostan.

The year was 1992. The Soviet Union had collapsed the previous year, and public interest was high in once-banned religion. Two Russians from Moscow showed up at Almira's school in the city of Sibay and offered extracurricular courses on extrasensory perception.

Almira's parents forbade Almira from attending the courses.

The Russian teachers, however, promised to reveal amazing secrets, including how to heal illnesses. Mother had suffered headaches for some time, and Almira wanted to help her. So, she secretly attended the courses. She was taught that she was surrounded by invisible good and evil forces and, if she mastered them, could perform wonders.

Alone at home, she attempted to put into practice what she was learning. She carried out a one-sided conversation with unseen forces in her home, saying that she wanted to control them.

That night, when she turned off the light to go to bed, she sensed a presence in the room.

After a while, the presence manifested itself during the day when she was at home alone. Sometimes she noticed a shadow running past a window.

She was not afraid. She thought that she was strong and was on her way to controlling an invisible force.

As time passed, she realized to her chagrin that the force was stronger than her.

She could not control it.

Frightened, she stopped turning off the lights when she went to bed at night. She was afraid to sleep. When she finally slept, she had terrifying nightmares.

In desperation, Almira asked Mother to sleep with her. But Mother refused after a few days. She said she was having nightmares.

Over the next six months, Almira's life turned upside down. Her grades suffered, and she seemed to be in constant conflict with teachers, friends, and her parents. She grew terrified. She didn't know where to turn.



Read more about Almira next week. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in Russia and around the world.