

Have you ever bought a product based on a before and after picture? In exchanged for 30 of your dollars you were promised you could look 20 pounds thinner, 10 years younger. A single pill a day could make you more vigorous, more voluptuous, or more virile. And according to this ad you can not only get skinnier, you can change skin color.

Years ago, not long after we'd purchased our first car together, I purchased this miracle car polish that was supposed to restore showroom shine. It ruined the paint job. I followed the directions precisely, but it left a checkerboard pattern that could be clearly seen in the sunlight. I've been skeptical ever since.

In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul gives us a before and after picture of the Christian life that has been changed by the grace of God. The secret sauce comes in vs. 8, the miracle product that changes everything, and this is our Core verse this morning,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

Grace is what set's Christianity apart from all other faiths. Philip Yancey tells this story in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Decades ago, during a British conference on comparative religions, scholars from around the world were debating whether there were any beliefs that were unique to Christianity.

Someone suggested that it was the idea of the incarnation, that God took human form in Jesus. But someone pointed out that other faiths believe that God appears in human form.

Another claimed it was the resurrection, but again, other religions had accounts of people returning from the dead.

As the debated dragged on, professor and author C.S. Lewis walked into the room. He plopped down in a chair took note of the heated debate, and asked, "What's this rumpus about?"

They explained they were debating what's unique about Christianity.

"Oh, that's easy." Lewis replied, "It's grace."ⁱ

After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. Christianity alone claims God's love comes free of charge, no strings attached. No other religion makes that claim. Buddhists, for example follow an eight-fold path to attain enlightenment. Hindus believe in karma, that your actions continually affect what you receive from the world. Jews must follow the law. Muslims achieve righteousness through prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and purification through good deeds. Even then, they can never be sure of their salvation.

I. Before

To repeat Philip Yancey's question, what's so amazing about grace? This is where Paul's before picture comes in. And unlike many of the before-and-after advertisements, this isn't just a bad

picture, taken in bad light, with a bad camera by a bad photographer. It is a picture of how things actually were. Ephesians 2:1-3 show us the problem in ultra HD clarity.

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.

The first thing you notice in the before picture is that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. He's talking about spiritual death. We all have issues that lead to spiritual death. But just because it's spiritual death, doesn't mean that it is any less real, or any less dead. You see a person can be very alive physically, but a rotting corpse, spiritually.

A. Spiritual Death

So what does it mean to be spiritually dead? Well, if death is the cessation of certain vital functions, then spiritual death is the absence of vital spiritual function. First, it means our thinking is dead. No, we're not brain dead, but our mind's ability to comprehend and process spiritual truth is dead. The non-Christian mind loses its ability to properly process the moral dimensions of each decision and understand the spiritual implications and what the ultimate consequences will be. It narrows the mind's ability to morally focus to such a narrow, one-dimensional, selfish perspective that it cannot comprehend spiritual repercussions of any choice.

Why were we spiritually dead? Paul uses two words here— trespasses and sins. Paul's not really describing two separate things here, but he's using two words to encompass everything we do to rebel against the will of God, to break the heart of God, and to alienate ourselves from relationship with God.

Trespasses refer to a false step, to step over the line. This is when you go the wrong way down a one-way street. This is when you go through the door that says, "Do not enter." God says, "Here's the line, and I don't want you to go over it." And what do we do? We blow right past it. We pretend it isn't there, or we justify why it doesn't really apply to us.

Sin simply means to miss the mark. It's every time we fall short of who God wants us to be. It's every time we don't measure up to his purity, his holiness, his goodness, his love, and his mercy. We fall far short.

Paul says in the first part of verse 2 this is the way in which we once walked. Walking is the picture of an ongoing, habitual repeated problem. We didn't just blow it once. It wasn't a one-time mistake. It was a lifestyle, pattern of behavior.

1. World

The first reason is the world around us. It's just a part of the world we live in. Paul says in verse 2 we "*once walked, following the course of this world.*" This is the way of the world. This is our culture. Turn on the TV and this is what you see. Stream the top hits on Spotify, this is what you'll hear. Eavesdrop on the conversations in the hall around your locker, or in the breakroom at lunch this is what you'll hear. There's a reason why people justify their actions by saying, "Well, everyone's doing it." It's the way of the world, and we were just following it.

2. Satan

But there's more. secondly, Paul says we were also "*following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.*" This brings it up to a cosmic level. He's talking about Satan here. He is the prince of power at work in this realm. From a 1st Century perspective, the air refers to this earthly realm as opposed to the heavenly realm or the spiritual realm where God is.

When you passionately pursue whatever it is that your flesh wants, that's not freedom, that's not just doing what you want, you are in bondage to spiritual forces beyond your ability to know. You're simply carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, but guess who the one is cracking the whip tempting your flesh and your mind with these things. It's not you. It's not your best friend. It's not your coworkers or classmates. It's the one who desires nothing good for you. It is one who wants only to see your death and destruction and despair. It is the one who makes your misery his purpose and convinces you to cooperate to that end.

You don't have to wear black robes, have a goat's head set up in your basement and draw pentagrams on everything to follow Satan. All you have to do is regularly give in to everything the flesh wants. Satan will be perfectly satisfied if you do that. You can even go to church, sing songs, and call yourself a Christian, just so long as you keep giving in to everything the flesh desires, and Satan is happy.

3. Flesh

But before we all claim, "The devil made me do it," Paul makes it very clear this is a personal problem. We can't just blame it on the world we live in, or on spiritual forces beyond our control. In verse 3, Paul writes, "*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.*"

The third thing that leads us to spiritual death is our flesh. We are betrayed by our own bodies. It's everything our flesh desires. It's the cravings that we cannot seem to be able to say "No" to.

Romans 8:6 literally says, "*The thinking of the flesh is death,*" What that means is that the sinful mind thinks after only what the body wants, and ultimately that leads to death—the death of intimacy, the death of dreams, the death of hope, the death of relationships, the death of

careers, the death of influence, the death of legacy, and ultimately death itself.

Think of how many tragic stories of rich and famous people end in death. These are people who were able to literally get anything their flesh desired, but it was never enough. And things end tragically in a bottle of pills, in a blaze of fire in a car driven at insane speeds off of the road, drowning in their own vomit, and the end of a shotgun blast, or simply a burnt out life that flames out decades early.

Ultimately, that would be all of our stories. Notice how he says, “*And YOU were dead.*” He’s talking to Christians here. This is my before picture. This is your before picture. Just in case we doubt it, in verse 3, he says, “*among whom WE ALL ONCE LIVED.*” Paul includes himself in this. This is a universal problem.

If what your flesh wants is all you want out of life, I can tell you what you will get— fear, anxiety, guilt, hostility, emptiness, loneliness, and despair. That’s the rotting corpse of a spiritually dead mind. Spiritual death, left unchecked will lead to physical death, and ultimately, eternal death.

B. Children of Wrath

Spiritual death is only the first part of the problem. The second, and bigger issue is what Paul reveals in verse 3, that we were, “*by nature children of wrath.*” Wrath is an angry disposition. A wrathful person is someone who has been provoked to anger. This doesn’t mean that we’re all angry, or that our parents were mad all the time. This is talking about the wrath of God, and how because of our sinful natures we become the recipients of God’s wrath.

God is ticked off. I know this is not a popular subject to preach on these days. Hell fire and brimstone went out about 50 years ago, and except for the bullhorn bullies on street corners and college campuses, no one likes to talk about the wrath of God anymore. But it is an essential part of the before picture. We were dead in our sins, and because of that we were objects of God’s wrath.

Paul writes in Romans 1:18, “*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*” We deliberately deny the truth of God. We deliberately rebel against the will of God, and so God’s wrath will be poured out. What Paul is saying here is that we were worthy of receiving divine judgment. God’s holy anger burns against sin, and because of that we only had fearful expectation of judgement to come.

I told you the before picture wasn’t too pretty.

II. After

In every before-and-after story there comes that point of change that leads to the After picture. You discover a miracle product. A friend recommends something you’ve never tried. You make a crucial decision. That surprise twist comes in starting in verses 4 and 5.

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.

The very God, whose wrath and judgment was aimed directly at us, intervened to save us from that wrath. Whoa! What's going on here?

I want to be very clear here, because some people have a real hard time understanding this whole wrath-of-God thing. God wasn't angry at you. He's not ticked off at you. Romans 1 was clear that God was not angry with us, but he was angry at our godlessness and wickedness. He's mad at the bad stuff we do, but he doesn't hate us.

God has never hated you. Let me say that again. God has never hated you. Never. He was mad at sin. He's mad everything sin has done to you and to this world. He's ticked at all the misery and despair it causes. He's angry at all of Satan's attempts to destroy his creation. But God was never angry with you. Even today, no matter what you've done, God doesn't hate you.

How do I know this? It says right here, "*God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us.*" Hear those words. They're beautiful words. They're words of salvation. God loves you. He wants to show you mercy. He doesn't just love you. He loves you with a great love, a tremendous love, of love beyond measure. This is *agape* love— that unconditional love that is willing to do whatever it takes to show itself.

Love is the cause of grace; mercy is the result is the result.

Paul interrupts his own train of thought here, to make this declaration at the end of verse 5, "*— by grace you have been saved*" There it is. There's the magic word— grace. Amazing grace. Do you want a definition of grace? It's right here in Ephesians 2:

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, 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.

Even while we were still ignoring God and rebelling against him, He loved us so much that he poured out his mercy through Jesus, so that we could spend all eternity with him receiving his immeasurable blessings forever.

Let me summarize this definition of grace this way— a little mnemonic device— I learned in seminary **GRACE – God's Riches At Christ's Expense.**

And don't miss how all of this hinges on Jesus. These verses are liberally peppered with prepositions and Jesus. "with Christ," "with him," "with him," "in Christ Jesus," "in Christ." Five times in three verses. We are made alive with Christ. We are raised with Christ. We are seated with Christ. We receive riches in Christ.

We experience none of God's love and mercy without Jesus doing what He did. It was the only way to satisfy both of wrath of God against sin, and the love of God for you. Jesus carrying our sin to the cross allowed God to both pour out his righteous wrath against sin, defeating the plans of the devil, and then to pour out his love and mercy on you.

Let's look at the blessings mentioned here.

A. Made Us Alive In Christ

Paul's first stroke in the *after* picture is that God made us alive with Christ. No longer spiritually dead, but made alive. This is a word for resurrection that means that something that was dead is brought back by joining it to the life of something else. Jesus became our life support. We live because of the life he gave us. He gave us a transfusion of life. He didn't just donate a lung or a kidney, but he gave his entire life that you might live.

B. Raised Us With Christ

The second part of the picture is that God has raised us with Christ. This is just another way of saying that we have been united in Christ's resurrection. One of my favorite sci-fi technologies that I would love to see in real life are the transporters in Star Trek. The way they work in Star Trek is that anything your holding or carrying gets transported too.

That's how it works with Jesus, as long as you are connected to Jesus, you are joined to His resurrection.

C. Seated Us With Christ

The third part of the *after* picture is we have been seated with Christ. This is a promise of our future destiny. Specifically it says that we have been seated with him in the heavenly places. You see, God didn't just raise us up from the depths of spiritual death. He raised us up to seat us with Jesus. Heavenly realms refers to the spiritual dimension where Christ currently sits on the throne with God.

The Scriptures talk about how after the resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of the father. We looked at this several weeks ago in Acts 1. The promise here is that one day we will sit on the throne with him.

That will be your seat in heaven. Sitting at the kids table.

D. Give Us Riches in Christ

The fourth part of the *after* picture speaks of the immeasurable riches we will receive in Christ. In Ephesians 1 Paul has already stated that he "*has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.*" He hasn't promised us riches in this world, but He has certainly promised them in the next. Now think about this: how many riches can an infinite God give in an infinite eternity. An infinite amount. We have no context, no ability to understand what God

has in store for us. We can wonder about heaven. We can speculate on eternity. We can dream about streets paved with gold, or jewel encrusted walls, but we have no idea of all that is our in Christ Jesus. Amazing grace indeed!

E. Good Works in Christ

The last part of the *After* picture are all the good works for which God created us in Christ. All of these blessings of grace aren't just to indulge or pamper us, but to work through us. Verse 10 says,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Paul is very clear that we are not saved because of our own good works. We don't earn it. We are not saved by our own effort. It is the gift of God. But this doesn't mean that works have no role to play. We aren't saved by works, but we are saved for works.

God's grace is the medicine. Faith is the syringe that injects the medicine where it is most needed. Good works are the result of the medicine doing its thing. In every other religion, you do certain works in order to earn salvation, but in Christianity we are saved so that we can do good works.

And God already has the perfect thing for you. When preachers talk about how God has a plan for you, this why we say things like that. You are created in Christ for good works, and God has already prepared them in advance. Imagine God in heaven saying, "Oh, this would be perfect for you."

But of all the works that God has called us to, the most important thing is to offer the world the same grace God has shown us. George MacDonald writes,

"The world can do almost anything as well as or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace."

Grace is the one thing we have in abundant supply. Grace is all about what God gives us, not what we deserve. Grace is about God's desire to love us, not our ability to perform. Grace is about God wanting to have a relationship with us, not making sure that we dot every i and cross every t. Grace is about receiving the best, when we only expected the worst. It has been said, "Justice is getting what you deserved. Mercy is not getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you do not deserve."

ⁱ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/october6/7tb52a.html>