YOU ARE A TROPHY OF GOD’S GRACE  EPHESIANS 2:1-10

When my parents ended their ministry as missionaries in India, they eventually became professors at a Bible college in Florida and served there until they both retired. Not surprisingly, they became mentors and friends to many students over those years. This particular college – for some reason – attracted its fair share of students who had very checkered pasts. Drug addiction. Alcohol abuse. Promiscuity. Many of them came from shattered, deeply dysfunctional families of origin. But somewhere along the way in the midst of all that human devastation, they had thrown themselves upon the grace and mercy of God and their lives had been transformed. Now they were at Bible college preparing for ministry of some kind or for a teaching career in the public schools. Over the years, Mom and Dad would share their stories with me – young people delivered from hopelessness and re-directed miraculously into lives that brought praise and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. Mom and Dad had a phrase they would often use to describe these young people: trophies of grace. “Oh, now, he’s a real trophy of grace” or “Oh, if you only knew what her past was life, you’d see that she’s a wonderful trophy of grace.” It was their way of marveling at the power of God and what it can do in and to a broken, sin-devastated life through Jesus.

I love that phrase: a trophy of God’s grace. And the longer I live, the more I come to realize that every single follower of Jesus is a trophy of grace. Each of us have been broken and shattered by sin. Yes, some more than others. Yes, some in more outward and observable ways than others. But each one and every one of us is truly and forever a trophy of God’s grace. We’re in the midst of a three month study of Paul’s letter to the Christians living in and close to the city of Ephesus. I’m calling the series “Child Of The One True King: Discovering Who You Are In Christ.” Today we consider the first ten verses of chapter two. Let’s read them just now. READ, p. 1156-1157. What a wonderful portion of God’s Word and just impossible to understand fully in one message! But let me suggest that in v. 1-3 there Paul reminds us of what we are without Jesus. It’s a very grim, gloomy, depressing business. But then Paul goes from the deepest pessimism to the loftiest optimism in v. 4-10 when he explains what we are because of Jesus. Let’s get the bad stuff over first!

WHAT YOU ARE WITHOUT JESUS

It is so appropriate that on this Sunday when we observe Communion that we remember what life used to be like or what life would have been like if Jesus had not shed His blood for us. In v. 1-3 at least three facts are made crystal clear. First of all, without Jesus, you are dead. Overstatement? Exaggeration? Hyperbole? Well, Paul says right there, “Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.” (Eph 2:1 NLT) Dead in what sense or what way? Without Jesus, you are essentially dead to God. You cannot respond to God. His thoughts and ways are utterly alien to you. His values and priorities mean nothing to you. Yes, you are physically alive, but spiritually dead. Your life
is a living death. And the result of being without Jesus is death in every way a person can die: spiritually, morally, relationally, physically, eternally.

Second, without Jesus, you are a slave. There’s a real irony at this very point. People without Jesus like to think of themselves as free in every sense of the word. They don’t call anyone “Lord” or answer to anyone. But the Bible says that anyone without Jesus is a slave and is often unaware or blind to his or her own enslavement. A slave to what? A slave to what some have called “the unholy trinity.” Without Jesus, you are a slave to an internal master: your own sinful nature. “All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature.” (Eph 2:3 NLT) The old King James Version word is “flesh” which is a literal translation of the Greek word. What exactly is your sinful nature or “flesh”? It’s this internal mass of chaotic, distorted, powerful and evil desires, drives and ambitions. Lots of people think immediately of sexual desires run amok, but “flesh” is a term that covers far more than broken sexuality. Your “flesh” – your sinful nature – is a distorted self-centeredness that gets expressed in many different ways – greed, materialism, selfishness, hatred, pride, jealousy, gossip, over-indulgence, addictions, apathy – just to name a few. There’s even “religious flesh”! What’s that? One example is being a legalist; in other words, reducing life in Jesus to a bunch of dos and don’ts. Another example is being judgmental - just writing people off as being unworthy of God or unworthy of His grace as if any of us are worthy.

Without Jesus, you are also a slave to an external master: the world. “You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world…. ” (Eph 2:2 NLT) Paul wasn’t talking about planet Earth. This is the prevailing value system in whatever culture or society in which we live. Now, not everything in American culture is bad or anti-God. That’s why every follower of Jesus has to develop discernment as to what pleases God and what dishonors God in whatever culture we live in. By “world”, Paul is pointing to a kind of spiritual force or atmosphere out there that rejects and hates God and everything about God. It also puts this incredible pressure on you and me to conform to its values and beliefs. Most of us don’t really enjoy being different, so we feel this great pressure to just give in – to get molded and shaped by the overall perspective of the culture we live in. People without Jesus are enmeshed in the world. They walk around in it every day. Without realizing it, they’re devoted and subservient to it. They’re slaves to it.

Without Jesus, you are a slave to a master from beyond: the devil. “You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God.” (Eph 2:2 NLT) I think the devil has mixed feelings whenever we discuss him. On the one hand, his pride loves any attention. On the other hand, his work is much more effective when he and his power aren’t acknowledged at all. He’s most effective when he can work secretly. The Bible teaches us that the devil is a personal, spiritual being of great, evil power. He has the ability to work through the world – that external master – and also through
your sinful nature – that internal master - to tie you up in knots. He’s the master from beyond. The devil and his demonic cohorts are formidable enemies that want to destroy and ruin every human being. People without Jesus are enslaved to him and he could care less whether they acknowledge that fact or not.

Without Jesus, you are dead. Without Jesus, you are a slave. Thirdly, without Jesus, you are condemned. “…By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.” (Eph 2:3 NLT) By nature, you and I resist God. You’ve proven that by the fact that you have said and done things that are against His will or are contrary to His commands. That’s earned you a terrible result: God’s judgment. God’s condemnation. Contrary to what you might think, God’s great anger towards any and all sin is actually an expression of His love. You’ve never seen anger until you’ve had to confront a mother whose child you just hurt or injured in some way. Her anger is an expression of her love. God hates sin because it damages and destroys what He loves. Sin damages and destroys you; therefore, God will not excuse it or compromise with it.

Now, I realize that most of us here today are grateful followers of Jesus, but we would be naïve to believe that every person here today has been truly born again by the Spirit of God. My friend, you know who you are. It is my responsibility to say to you in Jesus’ Name and upon the authority of God’s Word, that you are dead, you are a slave and you are condemned to an eternity in Hell unless something changes. You must throw yourself upon God’s mercy and grace. You must confess your sin and receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You must be born again by the Spirit of God. I invite you to become a trophy of His grace!

But, every child of God here, listen to me today. Communion is an opportunity to examine yourself to see where you might have gotten enslaved all over again. In the old Anglican ritual of confirmation, candidates literally renounce allegiance to the world, the flesh and the devil. Communion is a periodic opportunity for just that - to ask the Holy Spirit to point out where we’ve gotten enslaved all over again in some way to the world, the flesh and the devil. We are never told to examine the lives of other followers of Jesus. We are told to examine ourselves and especially before Communion. “Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.” (1 Cor 11:28 NIV)

Years ago now there’s a story of a little mole that tunneled into the base of a rebuilt levee down in Arkansas. Levees are mounds of dirt built right next to rivers to prevent them from flooding. This mole’s underground work caused a break in the levee system during the high water period of time that year. It resulted in the crumbling of fifty feet of the Red River levee system. Just a little mole scratching around in the dirt? Yes! Little things can make a big difference. If a little mole could cause the collapse of a levee, you can be sure that seemingly small, but unconfessed sins in your life or mine can contribute towards a spiritual collapse ultimately. Let the Holy Spirit examine you today and then go
out and do whatever He reveals. He wants to set you free! What you are without Jesus. But now let’s consider what these verses tells us about…

**WHAT YOU ARE BECAUSE OF JESUS.**

Now this really is good news! First of all, because of Jesus, you are saved by grace. “God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.” (Eph 2:8-9 NLT) If you want the essential message of Christianity put in a nutshell, it’s hard to find a better statement than that one. Earlier Paul says, “But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much that…” (Eph 2:4-5 NLT) “But God.” That’s where it all started. Dead people can’t do anything. That’s precisely why God took the initiative to do what He did. And why? The only adequate explanation is love. God didn’t love you because you were so loveable or because He’s just an “old softy” at heart. For His own sake and as an expression of His own character, God showered you with His love. His love for you demanded the payment of a terrible cost by His Son, Jesus. “…Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.” (Eph 2:13 NLT)

You are saved by grace. You’re not educated into it. You can’t earn it. You can never deserve it through your own personal effort to be good or moral. Someone has described mercy as “being delivered from all that I deserve” and grace as “receiving what I will never deserve.” God has done both in Jesus. All you can do is receive it - lost in wonder, love and praise. You bring nothing to this Table. You add nothing to this Table. You cannot enhance it or contribute to it. Like it says in the old hymn, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.”

Second, because of Jesus, you are a work of art. “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” (Eph 2:10 NLT) That’s a variation on “the trophy of grace” idea I spoke about earlier. Did you ever think of yourself as a work of art? Well, that’s what God says you are! Now, there’s no reason to get all arrogant and full of yourself, because it happens in spite of you far more than because of you! You are God’s work of art, not your own. Certainly you must co-operate and participate, but the final product is wholly up to God. When Cheryl and I visited Italy a few years ago, we got to see some of Michelangelo’s famous sculptures. Very impressive! It’s said that he could see what he wanted to sculpt out of a block of marble before he ever laid a chisel or hammer to it. That’s how it is with God when He looks at you and me. He already knows the work of art He wants to create. He has an eternal masterpiece in mind!

“For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” (Eph 2:10 NLT) That’s a fascinating verse. Do you remember back in chapter one that we learned God chose us to belong to Him before the creation of the world? Well, this verse tells
us that God lovingly planned out all the ways you would glorify Him through your words, your conduct, and your ways of serving inside the church and outside the church. God has a plan and purpose for you both in this life and for eternity. You are His work of art... His masterpiece... His trophy of grace for all eternity!

Finally, because of Jesus, you are united with Him. If you let this get a hold of your mind and heart, it will change your life! “For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.” (Eph 2:6-7 NLT) Notice the tense of the verbs in those verses – “raised... seated... has done... united.” They’re in the past tense! Whatever is being described here has somehow already been done to or for you. I don’t understand it fully, but it seems to me that what Paul is saying here is that at the moment the Holy Spirit enters your life, God immediately conveys to you certain spiritual realities. You died with Jesus. You were buried with Jesus. You rose with Jesus. And you are seated with Jesus in Heaven. All of that was given to you in the past, but you entered into it or claimed it the moment you trusted in Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

Watchman Nee was a Chinese Christian leader who had an outstanding ministry to his own people in China before and after the communist revolution in that country. After some 20 years of imprisonment for his faith in Jesus, he died in 1972. Watchman Nee wrote a wonderful little book on Ephesians that’s had a profound impact upon me and many others around the world. The title is “Sit, Walk, Stand.” In that book, Nee points out that the Christian life has a certain everyday lifestyle which he calls a “walk.” It also demands that you stand against sin and evil both in yourself and society, too. But before you can walk or stand, you need to sit! In other words, you need to sit down - or put your full confidence – in what God has already done for you. You have to learn how to put everything about yourself – your past, present, and future; your problems; your dreams and ambitions; everything about who you are – upon Jesus. You sit with Jesus. You rest in what Jesus has accomplished for you. Sit, walk, stand. That’s the Christian experience. First you sit, then you walk and then you stand.

I touched on this same, wonderful truth last week. I pointed out just one very important implication. You don’t have to be a lifelong victim. A victim of what? A victim of all the wounds in your past and all the unresolved pain in your present. Like what? Things like physical or sexual abuse, an addiction, divorce, the death of a child, a bitterness or resentment that you can’t release, infidelity in your marriage, a health scare, or some close brush with death yourself – just any kind of traumatic, overwhelming hurt, loss, defeat or “train wreck”. We all know those kinds of experiences can have a tremendous, negative power over us. But because you are now united with Jesus, that stuff no longer must control, define or dominate you. Because you are united with Jesus, every issue, problem and hang up has been placed under your feet because everything has been put
under the feet of Jesus. Now, living that out in your everyday life is the challenge, to be sure, but that’s a spiritual fact that’s true for every child of God. You can acknowledge every “train wreck” in your life, but not be controlled and dominated by them. God has already triumphed over all of them through Christ. So have you because you are now united with Him.

Pastor Philip Griffin tells an amazing story about something that happened at his church. During the early days of his church plant in Texas they were baptizing lots of people so they brought in a small indoor swimming pool. One day there were about 30 people who were planning to be baptized. But just before the service Pastor Philip realized that they didn’t have a hose. The easiest and quickest solution was just to go buy one. As he was leaving to get the hose, a guy named John – a person new to the church - stopped him and said, "I'm glad I caught you, pastor. I need to talk to you." Pastor Philip tried to delay the conversation because he needed that hose, but John said, "No, I need to talk in private." When they got to Pastor Philip’s office, John said, "I want to know if you're for real." John had heard Pastor Philip preach on a previous Sunday about God’s incredible love. He doesn't always love our behavior, but He loves us. John went on to say, "Well, I'm struggling with homosexual desires and behavior. I'm in and out of gay relationships. I understand what the Bible says, and I want to do what God wants me to do—but I'm losing this battle. Several months ago, I tried to go to another church, but when I came clean about my struggles, they told me never to come back again. So I want to know if you're for real."

Pastor Philip and John developed a strategy which included getting John connected to a ministry that helps people battling same-sex attraction as well as joining one of the church’s small groups that Pastor Philip knew would embrace him. Before John left Pastor Philip’s office, he said, "Now I want to tell you one more thing." At this point Pastor Philip couldn’t help but think to himself, “I'm not going to have time to get that hose.” John continued, "When I pulled into your parking lot today, I wasn't aiming my car in this direction. I was going to kill myself. It was already in motion. I went to the hardware store and bought a garden hose earlier today, and I bought some duct tape. My plan was to drive down a country road and tape the hose to my muffler and feed it into my car window." Pastor Philip said, "John, for real, you bought a hose?" They both got a glimpse of salvation that day. John crossed the line of faith and let Jesus put his feet on a different path. Pastor Philip got his hose to fill up the baptismal pool. But far more than that. They got to see God take something that was intended for death - a garden hose - and use it to fill up something that means life - a baptismal pool. Pastor Philip tells that story now every time they do baptisms.

When you get united with Christ, God puts every sin, every defeat, every hurt, every loss, every “train wreck” under your feet because they are already under the feet of Jesus. He can even take something intended to kill you and transform it into a symbol of His grace and power. You are His masterpiece. You are a trophy of God’s grace. You are a child of the one, true King.