

Alive in Jesus

Ephesians 2:1-10

Our dog was called Vaila. She was a little Shetland Collie that we grew up with. She was a stupid dog. She used to bark at the moon, and chase smaller animals then run away from *them* once she'd caught them. But we really, really loved her.

One day, when I was about six years old, our family went to see a local dog breeder to choose a pet. There were plenty of more pedigree collies there to choose from - but (I think mostly due to the nagging of three small kids) - our family chose the runt of the litter.

And just as well for Vaila. My Dad later told me that the breeder said if we hadn't taken her, she was destined for drowning in a bucket. She wasn't worth enough to sell. But the good news was, she was chosen and very loved. We took her home, and she became part of our family. We lavished her with love, and I lavished her with chocolate. How that dog lived to be 15, I'll never know.

She was completely unaware of - well, a lot of things, really - but she was certainly blissfully unaware of the before and after story of her little doggy life. Before, she was destined for a bucket. After, she was destined for a new life with owners who lavished her with love (and chocolate).

In Ephesians 2:1-10, we read a before and after story. This is Paul writing to Christians to explain that there was a before Jesus bit in their life, and a since Jesus bit. God wants His people to be awake to the complete change of identity and destiny that has happened in their lives through Jesus. They were dead in sins. And now, they are alive in Jesus.

Can you think of a time when you hadn't realised what you were missing out on until after something had changed?

In vv.1-3, Paul tells the Christians that he's writing to - *you were dead in sin*. There's two ways of being - 'dead in sin' like v.1 describes. Or 'alive in Jesus' as v.5 describes. That's the before and after of human existence. Paul says that before knowing Jesus, we human beings are like dead men walking - sleepwalking into a destiny that we're as unaware of as Vaila was of the bucket she was close to ending up in.

Actually Paul describes this 'before Jesus' way of living in v.1 as not just *heading* for death, but *being dead*. That's both the status and destiny of human beings apart from the God who made them, although so few realise it. And Paul talks about 3 things that are killing people, that we start off completely unaware of.

There's 'the ways of this world' in v.2 - the culture that we live in that shapes every one of us in how we live. For older generations, and non-Western ones, a lot of that has to do with duty, honour and abiding by the rules of a system - being true to others and to the community. For younger generations in the Western world, it tends to be about being self made and doing what feels right to you - being true to yourself.

Also in v.2 there's 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is at work in those who are disobedient.' Okay, that might sound like it's from a fairytale. But Paul has already talked in chapter 1 about there being a spiritual reality that's bigger than the stage of this world that shapes what goes on here. It's language that fits the mystery of that, describing the influence of evil opposed to God.

This isn't something to dwell on lots, because God's saying more in this passage about human beings than evil powers. But He is telling us here that human life before Jesus is influenced by the enemy of God, whose ways are kind of 'in the air.' It's 'in the air' of the world to be either opposed to God, or to not want to think or speak about Him. I wonder if you've experienced that like I have this week? Why's there something thorny 'in the air' when God comes up in conversation?

Those are both external influences on human beings that shape us and our destiny before Jesus - the world and the enemy. But there's also an internal one described in v.3 - 'the cravings of our sinful nature... following its desires and thoughts.'

What's translated as 'sinful nature' is really the word 'flesh.' It doesn't mean that God thinks everything physical is bad. Food and drink and sex and sport and touch and dance and nature - it's all stuff that God positively created.

But 'flesh' is talking about a way of living that excludes spiritual reality. It's leaving God out of the picture. It's living your life in response only to your feelings, your impulses, your desires and cravings.

It's more and more popular to argue (and this is happening in the church now too) that 'if it feels right, then it must be right.' But this is leaving-God-out-of-the-picture thinking. And it can lead to disastrous choices, and always leads to a death destiny.

Paul says in v.3 that, before Jesus, human beings are 'objects of wrath.' Literally, that's 'children of wrath.' He talked in chapter 1 about being an adopted child of God, and the inheritance we get and God gets through that. Here he's talking about the inheritance that human beings deserve left to themselves, unadopted - and that's the wrath of God.

Nobody wants to listen to anyone talking about the wrath of God. It makes you squirm at best and boil up with your own wrath at worst. But God wants to talk about it here, through Paul.

God's wrath is actually *not* a boiling up fit of anger and unpredictable rage, as if you've really pressed His buttons and He's blown up at you. It's His consistent, pure reaction to a life that leaves Him out of the picture and messes up people and places around it with sin. Sin's worth getting angry about. You do, when it happens to you, right?

God says here, clearly and soberly, that human beings, however unaware of it, apart from Him who made them, are led in their living by their culture, His enemy, and their own appetites and desires - and the status and destiny they ultimately have is death.

No-one's being cocky here. This isn't a 'Christians are better than non-Christians' message. Paul says in v.3, '*all* of us lived life in this way at one time... *all* of us, left to ourselves, are in the default position of inheriting God's wrath and our death.' This is where human beings begin, and where so, so many of us stay. We're headed for the bucket, and we don't even know it.

How do you feel about God right now, in this moment?

When you read vv.1-3, you come away from it thinking, 'What? Surely it can't be as bad as that!' But when you read and appreciate vv.4-7, you come away from it thinking, 'Wow! Surely it can't be as *good* as that!' vv.1-3 remind the Christians Paul writes to that what they *were* was dead *in sin*. But vv.4-7 say that what they *are* is *alive in Jesus*.

However you answered that question about God, know that God feels something about you, too. It's there in v.4. 'Because of His great love for

us...’ Not just love. *Great love*. And Paul piles on the language of God’s affection for you, like He did in chapter 1. ‘Great love.’ ‘Rich mercy.’ ‘Incomparable riches of His grace.’ ‘Expressing kindness.’ That repetition of riches gives the idea that God’s got an inexhaustible wealth of love for you. Other people’s love might run out or fade away. But not His.

God’s not neutral about you, like pretty much most of the people outside of church I know are about Him. And He doesn’t *want* your destiny to be death and wrath. No, He absolutely, totally *loves* you - and that’s why He’s given you Jesus.

vv.4-5 say that ‘...*because* of His great love for us, God... made alive *with Christ*’ and v.6 says that you were ‘raised up *with Christ*.’ When you’re a Christian, you’re glued to Jesus - you’re so much entangled with Jesus and *His* destiny that what is true of Him is true of you. Just as Jesus was raised from death to life, everyone who is in Him has shifted from the ‘before’ of death, to the ‘after’ of life. That’s His status and destiny, so it’s ours too.

But there’s more! v.6 also says that God ‘seated us with Him in the heavenly realms *in Christ Jesus!*’ Incredibly, that’s saying that just as Jesus was raised to a place of glory and honour in the presence of God, we get to be there too! That’s His status and destiny, so it’s ours too. It’s like God has a VIP suite, and says to us, ‘Come in! I want you in here with me too!’

In the forever life to come, that’s going to be an astonishing place to be. But *right now*, in this life, you’re welcome to approach the VIP inner circle place of God in prayer. Because you’ve been seated with Christ Jesus - you have access! I wish we’d all make way more of that - me included.

But there’s more! v.7 says that the purpose God had in doing all this - making us alive with Jesus and seating us with Jesus - was so that ‘...He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.’ *Why* was God kind enough to make us alive in Jesus? So that He could *keep being* kind to us *forever!*

We didn’t rescue Vaila from a bucket only to wish her well then set her free into the wild (where she would no doubt have barked at trees until she expired). And we didn’t bring her into our house to just co-exist with us, feed her sometimes and otherwise generally ignore her. We brought her home to lavish her with cuddles and go for walks with her and, in my case, thoughtlessly over-bless her with potentially lethal chocolate!

I wonder what you think God saved you for? Do you think being saved from sin and death is like Jesus pushed you out the way of a bus, exchanged looks with you as if to say, 'pew, that was close... well, all the best,' and then headed off on His way with a wave? No!! He saved you to bring you home. To share life with you. *His* life. *His* home. Forever! That's how God feels about you; how God treats you. He *wants* to be with you!

How do you treat God? He's not a ticket to Heaven that you think really seriously about once in your life and then basically ignore after you 'prayed the prayer.' And He's not an eternal insurance policy that you come back to once a year or whenever your life is on fire again. *He is your life*. He's a person. He's *the* person. He defines you and loves you and lifts you from before to after, death to life.

Do you want to be with Him? Day by day, you can know Him. Love Him. Enjoy His company. Be blessed by Him. Be showered with His kindness. Be shaped by His way of living, which is very different to the old ways we talked of earlier.

None of this stuff - the way God feels about you, and the incredible life and kindness and destiny and blessings He gives you in Jesus - has anything to do with what you deserve. It is all to do with His *grace*. We're going to think more about that in a minute. But I could sum it up by going back to our story about Vaila.

She was the runt of the litter. She had no prospects. On paper, she was a write off. You could look around, and find more attractive or worthy-to-own dogs. You could look around and find less attractive or worthy-to-own dogs too, no doubt. But the bottom line was, we looked at her and simply loved *her*. She did nothing to earn that. She didn't have to. We just loved and chose *her*.

That, my friends, is how God feels about you, too. Except to Him, you're not a dog, you're a child. A child worth adopting and showering with life and kindness forever. Even at incredible cost to Himself in the death of Jesus, God's own Son. And the kindness He showers on you is not poisonous like mine was to Vaila! It's nothing but pure, rich and life giving.

How do you feel about God right now, in this moment?

Those of you on Netflix might have seen this show - The Good Place. The main character is Eleanor Shellstrop, who wakes up in an afterlife community

called The Good Place, designed by an eternal architect who made it for people who had lived good lives. She realises that she's been sent there by mistake, and that she should have been sent to The Bad Place for the people who weren't good enough, and spends her time trying to cover up her bad behaviour and trying to be a better person.

It's interesting to me that a show dealing with human destiny is proving popular. But it's tragic to me that this is still roughly the view that many people have about how life and death works. Or at least, it's the view that they think *we* have as Christians. Good people go to Heaven and bad people don't. And Jesus helps us to be better people. That's enormously frustrating and saddening. Because it's not what God says at all.

God knows how life and death works, because He decided it. And He has actually *told* us - that's why we have His Word in the Bible. So people can have their dinner table discussions and down the pub debates about it, but God says: 'HELLO?!? I'm *telling* you how this works! I had it written down for you!' And what He says in vv.8-10 is that life with Him isn't something you earn. It's a pure gift.

Paul repeats in v.8 what he said in v.5 - 'It is by grace you have been saved.' Grace to most people means something your gran asked you to say before a meal. But what grace really is can hardly be described. It's the undeserved gift of God in His loving-kindness.

It's looking at a wreck and calling it treasure. Seeing the runt of the litter and taking her home. Knowing the problem kid who's a repeat offender and giving him security and stability and identity. Seeing a pearl in what everyone else calls rubbish. God's grace to us is this - He gives life in Jesus to those who were sleepwalking in sin and death.

People don't give God too much thought because they're either terrified that they haven't done enough to have life forever or pretty sure that, if such a thing exists, they'll be fine because they've been decent people. People will say to themselves either, 'I haven't done enough, have I?' - or, 'I have done enough, haven't I?'

And God's short answer to both is 'no.' That takes the ambiguity and anxiety out of it completely. The answer's just 'no.' v.9 clearly says, 'you're not saved by works; by the things you do or don't do, at all.' But God says more. He says '*Jesus* has done *more* than enough. You can't earn that - it's my gift to you human beings.'

The way that we receive that gift, that grace, as v.8 spells out - is *through faith*. Remember, faith isn't just a set of things to believe. It's now-and-forever attachment to the One we believe in. A new life united with Jesus.

I *want* to say, 'if you haven't put your faith in Jesus yet, put your faith in Him!' I can say that until I'm blue in that face (and sometimes I feel like that's just what I'm doing). But people just don't do it. Not until the penny drops, the scales fall from their eyes, and they wake up to see what they've never seen before about Jesus.

vv.8-9 say that *both grace and faith* are the gift of God. If you're a Christian, you don't get to be proud of knowing things that others don't, or proud of being brave enough to have a faith that others haven't. You've only got it because God woke you up. Remember what Paul said at the beginning of the passage? 'You were *dead*.' Dead people can't wake themselves up. Only God can do that. The good news is, God *does* do that.

Chris' story

Time and again, I see that *when* people here are putting their faith in Jesus and coming alive, it's not because of anything they've done, or any of us have done - it's been God who has let them see and let them live.

And that takes us into the image Paul uses in v.10 - that those who have been made alive in Jesus are 'God's workmanship.' There's an artistic idea there. We're new *creations* in Jesus - that's what the verse says. He is making of us something new and beautiful, restored and transformed.

And there is purpose in what God is remaking us to be. We've been saved *from* something - sin and death - but we've also been saved *for* something, v. 10 says. We're 'created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.'

The way we live our lives as Christians is going to look really different from the way we lived them before Jesus. As Klyne Snodgrass says, 'If the desires of Christians are the same as those of non-Christians, and if the desires are fulfilled in the same way, the gospel is useless.'

Our way of life is not the *cause* of having the status and destiny of being alive - but it is the *result* of it. Christians aren't saved by living good lives (nobody is). But because we're saved, we do live new lives and walk new ways.

Jesus didn't come to tell us to be better people. He came to make us new people.

In the weeks to come, we'll see lots more about how that looks, and what the 'good works' or 'new way of walking' is that we're created for. But it all starts with grace. The story of our lives is that before Jesus, we were dead in sin - led by culture, the powers of spiritual evil, and our God's-not-in-the-picture desires. Then when God woke us up to put faith in Jesus, He made us alive with Him - glued to Him, loved, welcomed, cherished, showered with kindness, now and forever.

It's pretty typical to finish a sermon with a 'so what?' bit - a 'what can I do in response to this?' bit. But here's the thing. This passage doesn't tell you to *do* anything. It just describes death before Jesus, and life after Him. My prayer is that you would be aware of Jesus shifting you from death to life in Him. Whether you're already there, and realising that afresh will make your heart sing. Or whether you need the penny to drop and for Him to wake you up.

Vaila was never once aware of the bucket. And most people have no idea where they're headed either. All Vaila ever really knew was a family who loved her, doted on her and wanted her very much. God doesn't want the bucket for you. He wants to love you, be kind to you, and have you with Him. He wants to make you alive in Jesus. He wants you to *know* that that is your identity and your destiny. Do you know that?

Are you aware of...

Influences that shape your life and how you walk it? Permanent connection with Jesus? Confidence about purpose? Your feelings towards God? God's feelings towards you? Confidence about life? Confidence about death? Confidence about destiny?