

“But God!” | Ephesians 2:4-7

The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican
Preaching Draft | February 9, 2025
(Discussion questions on page 8)

It has a lot of power, this little word at the beginning of Ephesians 4, “**but**.” Grammarians call it a conjunction, meaning a word that is a bridge, or a link, between two thoughts or two situations. And this conjunction, “but,” carries a sense of **contrast**, or **surprise**. It is a little word that can turn everything on its head.

“We were losing, down by 2, no timeouts, seconds remaining, season seemingly over, feeling there was no hope, *but* Kelly made a halfcourt heave....and it went it!

“He was so sick, seemed to be slipping away, we had done all we could do, *but* the doctor suddenly arrived and saved his life.”

It is a little word, this conjunction, “but,” yet stands tall with defiance as it turns a loss into a win, a death into a rescue.

And so, we are to feel its force in the opening of Ephesians 2:4. From verses 1-3 Paul has painfully walked us into the basement of despair: we are dead in sins, led astray by world-systems, enslaved by dark forces, and by nature under divine judgment.

Then comes this little conjunction, mighty in its stride: *But!* It makes the reader sit up straight. *But!*

But what, Paul? BUT GOD, the Apostle thunders. Not, “but philosophers.” Not, “but educators.” Not, “but Caesars or Rabbis or Priests or Pastors.” Not, “but us or but me.” BUT GOD!

The Gospel shines bright red in this little phrase, and I want to stare at it with you. We will look at these two words, But God, in their context of **Ephesians 2:4-7**, and consider three emphatics ways they preach God’s Gospel in the face of human despair: (1) But, Hope! (2) But, Life! (3) But, Grace!

I. But, Hope!

First, these two words are a proclamation of defiant hope. Not man-made hope, however. It is hope that arises when men fall and fail, when we come to the end of ourselves. It is hope in the face of hopelessness. And this is why Paul continues—even after the depths of verses 1-3— to bring up our deadness:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ **even when we were dead** in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (2:4-5).

He brings it up yet again in verse 11-12, connecting it with hopelessness: “¹² remember that you [Gentiles] were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having **no hope** and without God in the world” (2:11-12).

Why does Paul keep emphasizing the plight we were in? It is because Paul does not believe, as modern people do, that humanity’s true problem lies, ultimately, in **socio-economic inequalities**, or a **lack of education**, or the **need for improvements in health care**. He understands that it lies in *sin*.

And sin is not, for Paul, a thing we do every once and a while that we can stop doing. Sin is our *nature*: since Adam, human beings are not able, to not sin. Regardless of upbringing, race, social-economic situation, man is not a being who sins sometimes because of his environment or lack of effort, man is a being who in his fallen nature, is *sinful*. And this means man is spiritually dead.

I wonder if we really grasp the **hopelessness** of this situation?

Only once have I been in a situation where I felt I might die. I was seven or eight. It was in a **wave pool** on a trip to Disney World. Out in the crowded and turbulent deep end, I got flung off my raft. I couldn’t swim to the side of the pool, because you only could exit this pool from the shallow end. I remember being submerged at one point under another raft. Panic, like an eclectic shock, shot through me. But then the arm of a life guard pulled me up and swam me to safety.

I have heard parishioners tell similar stories of experiences—whether as a youth or an adult—where they felt death was imminent.

I visited the 9/11 Memorial in New York City this summer. You could listen to audio from calls made from **flight 93**. You could hear people speaking who knew, based on circumstances, they were dead.

What these experiences have in common is the complete and utter severing of hope: *nothing more can be done*. They are frightening to think about.

I raise them, however, to pose a question of fundamental importance for understanding why the **Gospel** is **Good News**. The question is this: do we think the spiritual plight Paul explains in Ephesians 2 is less severe or frightening than those natural experiences just mentioned?

The hope of this passage begins to take root only when we realize that it wants to reach all the way down. It is a hope held out to dead men and dead women. These are not people who simply need motivation or guidance—they are people who need rescue. They are people who have something wrong with them at the level of their *nature*, and are in perilous danger in the context of their entire *world*, and who face a dark foe entirely beyond their human *strength*.

So, it is to hopeless men and women, dead men and women, that this little phrase thunders with hope: **But God!** And in this light, we might consider a few of its implications.

Apply:

First, This means indestructible hope: God does not want us to be naïve. We really cannot fix ourselves or our world. But neither does God want us to be despairing. God wants you to feel hope in the places where you feel despair: you despair that your sin is so dark, or so strong, that you can never be forgiven or free: But God is stronger than your sin! You despair that you will never be happy: But God knows the plans He has for you! You despair that you cannot face your terminal sickness: But God will take you into his presence when you die, and raise you up on the great day to new life!

Second, this diagnosis of hopelessness apart from God's intervention reminds us of **the heart of the Gospel message**. The heart of the Gospel **is not a summons to heroism, self-sacrifice, or courage**—though it lauds such qualities. The heart of the Gospel **is not an appeal to patriotism**—though it calls for people to pray for and honor their leaders. The heart of the Gospel **is not a call to social action**—though it motivates and calls for such action. The heart of the Gospel **is not a call to cultural reform**—though it may lead to such.

The heart of the Gospel is **God saves**—he reaches down and grabs the drowning man. He comes to dead men and women and “he makes us alive together with Christ, *even when we are dead in our trespasses*” (v. 2:5).

That is the first thing to notice about this But God—it is the But of Hope.

[T] Let us consider a second feature of these two words: “**But, Life!**”

II. But, Life!

Text: The rescue God provides is described by Paul as making alive those who were dead:

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 (2:4-5)

Paul goes on to add that God has

raised us up with [Christ] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (2:7).

This is resurrection life. The Christian will experience it fully at the time of the literal, physical resurrection. But notice that this passage makes clear that resurrection life is something we, spiritually, experience now. The passage does not say God *will* make us alive, but that we *have been made alive*.

What does this present experience of resurrection life entail? What does it feel like? How do we live it? A few things to note.

First, notice that it is always and everywhere a **life in relationship to Jesus Christ**. We are “*alive together with Christ*” (v.5), “*raised with Christ*,” and “*seated in the heavenly places in Christ*” (v. 7). God does not offer this life apart from Christ. Why?

Because behind Paul’s words are Christ’s life and death and resurrection. And in Christ’s death he took on our sins and paid the death-penalty for them on the cross so that we don’t have to. Only through the Cross of Christ does the penalty for our sins get removed, and then forgiveness applied.

And this brings us to the **second** feature. Resurrection life here and now **is the experience of forgiveness**. Are guilt is removed, and we are no longer under the wrath of God but brought into the embrace of our Father.

Third, resurrection life here and now means **transference**—being moved from the realm of sin, the world, and the devil, into the kingdom where Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit reign. Paul writes in Galatians that “Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal 1:4). While we formerly “once walked in sins and trespasses, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2-3), we have been delivered from the utter bondage and finality of that realm; we have true citizenship and access to Christ’s Kingdom.

Two thoughts about how this might apply to us.

Home is where the heart is. There is a saying, “home is where the heart is.” A mother who is traveling might find that her heart is at home with her family. A state-department family on assignment abroad finds at Christmas that their heart is in Virginia. Our home is with Christ. The experience of this new life is a sense—even faintly—that we are not quite at home where we are. And we feel most at home when we feel near Christ.

Second, because we are “seated in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus” we should cultivate a **life-style** that fits his kingdom not this one.

E.g., Grad School: During my last year at seminary, I was applying to a graduate program in England. When I learned I had been accepted, I still had to finish my course work in seminary. But knowing this was my future, where I belonged going forward, changed how I lived. I changed my course schedule to prepare for graduate school. I stewarded my finances differently. I made summer plans differently. My life-style was shifting to reflect that my home was somewhere else—even before I moved there.

Christians have “got in” to heaven. We are citizens of that kingdom. We should organize our life-style not as though this is our permanent home, but as though Christ’s eternal kingdom is.

[T] One final way to look at this powerful phrase, “But God,” and this takes us into the heart of things. **But, Hope; But, Life;** and now, Point 3, **“But, Grace!”**

III. But, Grace!

Text: Paul tells us that the climatic purpose of salvation is for God to display his grace for all eternity:

But God ... made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the coming ages **he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace** in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (2:4-7).

Grace is undeserved and unmerited favor. It can speak of an action God has taken on our behalf. The act of God sending his son to die for our sins is the most acute expression of God's grace.

But grace also refers, not just to an outer action, but an inner disposition—it refers to God's heart. Paul here gives us a window into the driving motives of the God who saves. He does so with a host of terms and phrases that overlap in meaning:

We read that God is “rich in **mercy**,” that he acted on our behalf because of “the great **love** with which he loved us” (v 4). In verse 7 we read of the “immeasurable riches of his **grace** in kindness toward us” (v. 7).

The fountain-head of grace is the merciful and loving heart of God. When we were dead in our sins and rebellion, God was moved towards us in compassion and love. And this means that for our hope and for our life everything depends, ultimately, on the movement of God's heart.

Prodigal Son

The beautiful example of this comes in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). This parable puts flesh on the doctrines that Paul is teaching in Ephesians 2.

A father has two sons. The young asks for his inheritance prematurely, a major social taboo, and when he gets it takes off to live a life of debauchery. This would have required the father selling off part of his estate to get the money for the son—he had to upend his life. And the son's departure was a rejection of the father outright—basically saying the father was dead to him.

The younger son's offense, then, is not just that he “squanders this wealth in debauched living” (Lk 15:14). It lies more deeply in his rejection, dishonoring and not loving of his father. Both a personal wound and social insult to the family patriarch.

The tension builds when the son, now poor and destitute, decides to come home and beg for a place of servitude on his father's estate. The disrespected father would have been well within his social and legal rights to utterly reject the son—and justice would have called for him to do so.

But this father is not like us. “While the boy was still a long way off,” Jesus tells us, the father “runs to him, embraces him and kisses him.” The Father even says, “this my son was dead, and now is alive” (Luke 15:20-24).

Here is the flow of Paul’s doctrinal statements in Ephesians 2. Paul opens in verses 1-3 recounting humanity’s rejection of God as their Father and Lord. And instead of finding freedom and life, they fall into enslavement and death. Just as the father’s prodigal son “was **dead**,” so too, Paul explains that every one of us now, “by nature” (v.3), is “**dead** in our trespasses and sins” (v.1, 5); and now, “by nature **children of wrath, like the rest of mankind**” (v.3).

But notice that everything in the prodigal son story comes to turn on **the heart of the father**. Even before the father runs and embraces and reinstates the son, we read this crucial phrase: “His father saw him and felt compassion” (Luke 15:20). It is a term, “compassion,” that speaks to a deep feeling in the gut. And this is precisely what Paul is relaying in our passage:

But God, **being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us**,⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:1-5).

Ephesians 2:1-10 is the doctrinal explanation for the story of the prodigal son—the story of every Christian who has been welcomed home. And it tells us that our lives and hopes rest, ultimately, on the loving heart of God.

As we move to close, consider two more points of application:

First, let us recognize that God’s grace towards us is motivated by a love that is different than our own. We talk much about love, and very much like the idea of it. But we find it hard, in actual fact, to love unlovable people. And this is because loves is not our nature—it is something that we must receive from God and share with others. But love is God’s nature: “God is love,” saint John says, and also says that “love is from God” (1 John 4:16, 7). This means that when you sin, or backslide, you will likely think that God’s love is withdrawn from you—because you imagine God is like us. He is not. God is a fountain of love. Having dealt our sins the just penalty on the cross, and removed them from us, God is now moved *towards* us in our struggles. There is no sin left to forgive—it has been delt with on the cross. There is just a son or daughter to uphold, and shape, into a mature man or woman.

Second, let us live as *saved people*, not good or bad people. Across history, we typically divide the world between two types of people: good, and bad. In the ancient world, the good were the religious, and the bad the irreligious. Today, the good are the moralist, the justice-seekers, the tolerant; the bad are the oppressors, the powerful, the unkind. But notice that in both cases—good or bad—we are evaluating people based on what they do. People are evaluated based on their merits, or de-merits. And either way, this system breeds exhaustion, competition, pride and strife.

The Gospel of Grace introduces a third way: not the good, nor the bad, but the *saved*—*saved*, as Paul says, *by grace*. These are the people who have realized that what they needed, they could not do on their own. *BUT GOD*, being rich in mercy, because of his great love for them, made them alive together with Christ. By grace they have been saved. (Eph 2:4-5).

To become God's son or daughter, the only requirement is to be a recipient of divine grace, by believing in God's Son.

And consider the type of community saved-people would cultivate. Not a community built around being good people, or even around being bad people who are trying to be good. But a community built around *saved people*. And saved people are humble people—because they live not by works but by grace. And saved people are dignified people—because they know God did not reject them, but loved them. Amen.

Small Group Questions:

1. What do you think is the greatest problem facing the world today? Read Ephesians 2:1-6. How does this passage impact your answer? What is the greatest problem facing each individual?
2. "But God" is a powerful phrase in Ephesians 2:4, especially coming on the heels of a description of humanity's spiritual deadness (Eph 2:1-3). How might this phrase apply to areas of hopelessness you see in our world, or experience in your own life?
3. How does Paul's diagnosis of our spiritual condition (Eph 2:1-3) and explanation of our salvation (Eph 2:4-6) impact our understanding of the heart of the Christian message? Why is it not enough simply to encourage people to live more moral lives, or help them with the practical needs? In what way does the Gospel say—not less—but something more?
4. Paul tells us that God has "raised up with Christ" and "seated with him in the heavenly places" (Eph 2:6). This speaks to a *present* feature of our resurrection life, even before our physical resurrection. What are some ways that Christians experience new life with Christ today?