

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – March 11, 2018

Ephesians 2:1-10

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Reflect on the provided questions
3. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”
4. Read the provided commentaries below
5. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)

Reflection Questions on Ephesians 2:1-10:

1. One of the older debates in the Christian tradition is by what means salvation comes to individuals – faith/grace or works? Though it is most often used to support arguments in favor of the former, this passage can be used to support either end of the faith/works spectrum (see verses 5, 8, & 9 as contrasted with v. 10). What is the nature of faith and works? Is such a distinction meaningful or valid? Does such a question distort the reality and nature of salvation? Or is it a helpful interpretive or motivational lens?
2. This passage contains a strong “before and after” theme which has made it a favorite of evangelists and recovery ministries that proclaim repentance and conversion. Does it also contain good news for those who have never experienced a profound “conversion experience”, or for those whose lives have been characterized by a slow and steady growth in faith and spiritual maturity rather than a dramatic reversal of lifestyle and/or behavior? Or does it suggest that a conversion experience of some kind a prerequisite for salvation?
3. What is the primary image of God you see portrayed in this passage? Sovereign Ruler? Merciful Savior? Cosmic Judge? Loving Creator? How does the image of God we perceive affect the way we understand and receive the message of this scripture (and others)?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?

Commentary on Ephesians 2:1-10

(From *Homiletics*; "A Piece of Work" – March 11, 2018)

Ephesians 2:1-10 follows a section of praise to God and encouragement of the audience that highlights God's redemptive activity in Christ (1:3-23). Then 2:1-10 launches another section (2:1–3:13) where the focus shifts to emphasize how this redemptive activity moves us from a dire past to a present with much more promising prospects for the future -- from being formerly dead due to sinfulness, to being presently alive due to the saving work of God in Christ (vv. 1-10); from formerly being divided into the uncircumcised versus the circumcised, to presently being reconciled (vv. 11-22); from God's will formerly shrouded in mystery, to God's will presently revealed (3:1-13).

In verses 1-10, this movement from hopeless past to hopeful present is portrayed through contrasts where the holiness depicted in verses 4-10 boldly counters the unholiness identified in verses 1-3. In addition to life-countering death, God's purposes counter not only human passions and desires, but also "the ruler of the power of the air" (v. 2). "Heavenly places" (v. 6) counter the world and the air. Mercy and love counter wrath. Works prepared by God "to be our way of life" (v. 10) counter "the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient" (v. 2).

These contrasts are further reinforced by an irony and a clarification. The irony is that living in trespasses and sins actually amounts to being already dead (vv. 1-2a). The clarification is that being "created in Christ Jesus for good works" means that the good we do is not so much a question of how we work for God as it is the question of how God works through us. In both cases, the answer to being authentically alive has to do with being aware of God's purpose for making us and then participating in a way of life that God has prepared for us.

At the center of the move from hopeless to hopeful in vv. 1-10 is grace. There is grace in God's mercy (v. 4), love (v. 4) and kindness (v. 7). Grace corresponds with God making us alive and raising us up with Christ (vv. 5-6). Most saliently, it is by grace that we are saved (vv. 5, 8). Thus, grace is instrumental to both the pathway of holiness extolled in verses 4-10 and the power of that holiness to overcome what is unholy in verses 1-3.

With respect to grace in this passage, an aspect of interpretation that has kept scholars and commentators busy is the statement: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing; it is the gift of God" (v. 8). To what do "this" and "it" refer? The preacher may want to give some thought to a few possibilities, being honest enough to recognize that her or his theological predisposition may influence which way to go. Together, "this" and "it" may refer to grace, or to being saved, to faith or perhaps to the entire (and not so easily parsed) construct that salvation comes by grace through faith.

Critical to any of these options is acknowledging that of greatest import here is God's initiative, not ours; for even when we can speak of faith in terms of human initiative, it is still a response to what God has done first by way of grace and salvation.

A notable feature of verses 1-10 is the way it holds together doctrine, ethics and exhortation. The passage agilely touches on such doctrinal matters as sin, grace, salvation, faith and providence. While there are no specific ethical directives in verses 1-10, a strong foundation for ethical behavior is established in the reality that we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (v. 10). Exhortation emerges from the series of robust assurances in verses 4-10 about God's gracious initiative in recovering us from the hopelessness described in verses 1-3.

An overall sense of recovery running throughout the lection -- from death to life, from hopeless past to hopeful present, from the unholy to the holy -- positions verses 1-10 as a compelling text for preaching in Lent. The stakes of repentance at the center of our Lenten preparation for Easter involve turning away from the very kind of death and spiritual darkness operating in verses 1-3, and turning toward the sort of life-affirming way of redemption operating in verses 4-10. Here, we are challenged to come to terms with the interaction between our capacity to repent and God's initiative to rescue us in the first place.

The implications for repentance and redemption that can be found in verses 1-10 are reinforced rhetorically by the repetition of two phrases: "once lived" (2, 3) and "by grace you have been saved" (5, 8). More than signifying a timeframe, the double use of "once lived" emphasizes how the circumstances of verses 1-3 indicate a dire existential condition, disobedience to God's will, from which we need to repent. On the other hand, the double use of "by grace you have been saved" points to a present existential condition that is now redeemed according to God's will, and with lasting effect. Here, "you" comes from the translation of the present tense verb, εστε ("you are"), and "have been saved" translates the perfect tense verb σεσωσμενοι from σωζω, such that a fuller translation might read something like: "By grace you [are now the ones who] have been [and remain] saved."

A closer reading of verse 10 underscores the impact of being redeemed. First, whereas the NRSV reads, "We are what he has made us" (v. 10a), the KJV offers a more literal translation, namely, "For we are his workmanship (ποίημα)." God has made us God's ποίημα -- God's handcraft, artwork, artistry. We ourselves are the work of God who creates us in Christ for good works (εργοις αγαθοις). This is the source of our existential condition as ones redeemed by the gracious initiative of God. Second, it follows that the good works for which we are created are connected to our being the product of God's own work, forming a kind of continuum between the work of the redeemed and the work of the Redeemer. Third, this continuum has a profoundly past-present-future character. What God has done in the past to redeem us and prepare us to serve God's purposes is presently in force and will continue to bear fruit as our way of life walking into the future.

The Lenten journey to the empty tomb often runs the risk of winding down to a shamble of stagnant liturgical routine. Ephesians 2:1-10 encourages us to remain spiritually engaged. The dynamics of repentance and redemption -- turning away from the living death of sinfulness and moving toward the true life of salvation -- take a lot of work, the holy work God willingly does to redeem us and the holy work God expects and equips us to do willingly as the redeemed.

Additional Resources

- ["The Text this Week"](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.