

The Greatest Love Story Ever
Ephesians 2:4-5
Sermon Notes
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Introduction

If you had to pick the greatest love story of all time, which would it be? According to Goodreads, the best romance novel of all time is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but *Romeo and Juliet* and *Twilight* were also on that list for your consideration. Maybe you would pick a different sort of classic, a Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan rom-com, or maybe your favourite love story is your own: your marriage or your family.

What about those of neighbourly love? I was amazed when I discovered the story of two men who dove into the Thames to save a drowning woman in April. Or the incredible retirees that are manning the nuclear power plant in Fukushima so younger people don't have to suffer radiation poisoning. What love!

My favourite fictional example is probably that of the bishop in the story of *Les Misérables*. After serving 19 years in prison for a small crime, our protagonist Jean Valjean has nowhere to go but he finds a meal and a place to stay for the night when he knocks on a bishop's door. Valjean though takes advantage of the bishop's kindness and steals some silver from the church. Then, in the middle of the night, he runs away only to get caught by some policemen and brought back to the bishop. Valjean lies to the policemen saying that the bishop gave him the silver. The policemen rightly think this is a lie, but the bishop instead goes along with Valjean's story and then goes even further, telling Valjean that he left in such a hurry that he left the two best silver candlesticks behind.

Whatever your favourite story is or whichever you would vote as the best, I'm not sorry to say that none of them hold a candle to the love story between God and us. No other love story sees one party take the other from death to life. Yet that is what God does for us, that is the gospel message, and that is what these two verses in Ephesians are all about. At the start of this story, we are dead. But out of his great love for us, God saves us from death, and the story finishes with a happy ending: we are made alive with Christ.

We're going to explore this amazing love story this morning in those three sections: dead, loved, alive.

Dead

Starting with "dead". Seeing as we're all very much alive, what does Paul mean when he tells the Ephesian church that they were dead? As important as our physical life is, it is not the most important part of our lives. That would be the state of our spiritual lives, the state of our relationship with God. It is in our spiritual lives that Paul says we are dead before we are saved.

But what does that look like? Imagine you are poking a corpse; I don't know why you would be but let's imagine. If you were to poke a corpse, you wouldn't get any response. The corpse is **unable** to respond. It cannot hear, or speak, or move. It has no life in it. In the same way, a spiritually dead person is unable to respond to spiritual matters: they do not hate sin, they cannot love God, they cannot accept God's word. Hebrews 11:6 says, "without faith it is impossible to please God." Faith, as we will look at later, is an essential component to spiritual life. Without faith in God and a relationship with him, we are spiritually dead.

There are other reasons as well. Before Paul dives into the love of God in these verses, he first brings a comprehensive account of spiritual death in verses 1-3.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Spiritual death is also traced back to our wrongdoing which our perfect God cannot accept. Isaiah 59:2 says, "Your iniquities have **separated** you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear." And there is no way we can excuse ourselves out of this evaluation. The whole story of our separation is covered in these verses. Firstly, the spiritually dead person chooses the wrong of others' ways, the devil's way, or their own way, rather than follow the good God who gives spiritual life. Secondly, we fail God entirely. Paul uses two distinct words. We **sin**, which means to miss the mark, to fail to live up to the standard and we **transgress**, which means to take a false step, to purposely reject the standard. Imagine a goalkeeper facing a penalty kick. To sin would be to fail to stop the shot going in. To transgress would be to turn your back and let the penalty go in. Either way, we are not a very good goalkeeper (insert your own example here).

This is a drastic picture of complete spiritual failure. But unfortunately, that isn't the end of it. Verse 3 tell us that all this leaves the spiritually dead person deserving of God's wrath. Sin cannot be ignored. Our good God cannot just reject evil, it must be punished. Much like a manager would drop a rebellious goalkeeper to the bench for the next match, our spiritual death leaves us dropped to the bench out of the manager's sight. But unlike the goalkeeper, our time on the bench may not be short-lived. Spiritual death has the danger of becoming eternal death. 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 says,

"He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord."

The danger of not knowing God now is we may not get to know him forever. This is the start of all our stories. As v2 says, all of us also lived among them at one time. This is our original spiritual position. Dead.

Loved

BUT. *“But because of his **great love** for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us **alive** with Christ **even** when we were **dead** in transgressions.”* BUT, Romans 5:8, *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Because of God’s great love for us, he sent his son Jesus Christ to earth to live a perfect life and then die on a cross where he took all our sins on his shoulders and paid the punishment that we deserve. Three days later Jesus rose back to life, proving he had conquered death and there was life beyond death.

Every good love story needs a sad place to rise out of and, in our relationship with God, that place is as dark and miserable as it gets. But that just elevates the greatness of his love. John Stott says, “Paul first plumbs the depths of pessimism about man (in v1-3), and then rises to the heights of optimism about God” in verse 4 onwards. And these heights are worth dwelling on. It’s easy to skip to the wonderful new earthly and heavenly life that God gives us, but then we miss the beautiful detail in God’s love for us.

Paul uses two words to describe our death, but he equally uses two words to **declare** God’s love: *“God, who is rich in **mercy**... and it is by **grace** you have been saved.”* Mercy means we are not treated as we deserve. We are not punished for our wrongdoing. Imagine a criminal facing a prison sentence. Mercy is not sending the criminal to prison even though that is what they deserve for the crime they committed. Mercy is the bishop agreeing with Valjean’s lie so he doesn’t receive the penalty for his theft. Mercy is Jesus’s death on the cross, where he paid the price for sin that we deserve.

Grace, on the other hand, means we are treated better than we deserve. The criminal now not only skips prison but is given a new house, a job opportunity, and some money to start a new life with. Grace is the bishop going back into the church and handing Valjean the best pieces of silver he has! This man has just stolen from you, and you are giving him more?! Grace is the gift of new life even though we are the furthest from deserving it.

The parable of the prodigal son is another great example of this. A son asks his father for his share of his inheritance which he then wastes away on wild living. The son returns home hoping his father will treat him as he deserves, the meagre offering of life as a servant. But instead, his father throws him a feast with the best cut of meat, he clothes him in an expensive robe and ring, and reinstates him as his son. From a wasted and rebellious life to a dignified and blessed one. That is the work of God’s love in our lives. That is the work of mercy and grace.

But there’s even more! God does not save us and then leave us. His love also guides us to our new lives. How do we actually get these new lives? Verses 8-9 say,

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.”

God's love is offered freely, but he will not welcome unbelieving children home. The father could not restore the prodigal son had he not returned home apologetically. We need faith to believe and, as John 3:16 says, "*Whoever **believes** in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Even in the faith needed to believe in him, God is gracious. Our relationship with God is entirely one sided in the best way. God loves us so much that he saves us **and** gifts us with the faith to take hold of that salvation.

I like the ESV translation of v4 which says, "because of the great love with which he loved us." God's love is not just a nice emotion, it is an active and involved love. Whilst our spiritual demise is all-encompassing, so is God's love.

Alive

Which leads us to the ultimate result of God's love. We are taken from death to life. Our sins are forgiven, we are no longer separated from God! We are made alive with Christ. 1 John 4:9 says, "*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.*"

And that starts here on earth. Upon giving Valjean the candlesticks, the bishop sings these words in the musical of Les Mis,

"But remember this, my brother, see in this some higher plan.
You must use this precious silver to become an honest man."

Which is exactly what Valjean does. I quote, "This provokes in Valjean a spiritual crisis that becomes the turning point that changes his life and causes him to show loving kindness throughout the rest of the musical." As Valjean's life changed with the bishop's forgiveness, when we receive the love of God, everything is flipped upside down. All those matters we were previously unable to respond to, we now respond with worship and love. When we hear of sin it now disgusts us, when we hear of God's love we hunger for it, and we love God's people where we previously didn't.

But Valjean didn't just show kindness because he was shown kindness, he also followed the bishop's words. With our new love for God, when we read his word, we take it in and change accordingly. 1 John 2:5-6 say, "*But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.*"

Now this is a lifelong goal. We will never be perfect as Jesus was. We still have our old sinful bodies, and we will continue to sin. Think of an old car factory that's struggling to produce cars. It changes its leadership, its vision, and its workers but it's only going to produce a few more cars than before unless it changes the outdated machinery. But the beauty of our new lives is we are never alone. God is always helping us, and he blesses us with sanctification – a long fancy word meaning "the **process** of making something holy like God" or "the process of becoming better." V6-7 say, "*God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ*

Jesus.” Our car factory has been stalling out, but in the incomparable riches of God’s grace, our old factory becomes a top performer. God is installed as our new boss, and he sets out a new heavenly vision. As the old machinery grinds its way towards that vision, God replaces bits of it at a time. The heart that couldn’t love, the mind that couldn’t forgive and forget, the lazy legs and the lying tongue. God is so abundantly gracious that his grace does not stop at the start of our new lives. He has grace to spare for all our days.

Our new life is a life lived as Jesus lived. But our new life is also a life lived in the power and grace of God. Not in the rusting power of our old machines, but in gracious power of new functioning machines.

Our new lives don’t finish here on earth. The most glorious life we live with Christ is eternal life in heaven. Just as Christ died but was raised up to heaven, so when we die, we too will be raised to heaven to live with him there. As Romans 6:5 says, “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Our previous eternal position is now a distant memory, our new lives continue beautifully and gloriously into eternity.

Conclusion

How do we respond to this gospel message? We first have to ask ourselves if we are spiritually dead. How do we react to spiritual things? How do we feel about sin, do we love or hate it? How do we feel about God, indifference or adoration? How do we feel about God’s people, as brothers and sisters or people we can’t wait to get away from?

Do you need the love of God in your life? If you do, Jesus says in John 5:24, “*Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.*” Hear the word of God, repent of your sins, and believe in the God who loves you and wants to give you life. Remember that faith is a gift from God so don’t be afraid if you can’t take that step straight away. Pray yourself or get someone to pray for you for that gift of faith so you can believe in him who loves you and will save you. Come talk to me or one of the elders. The greatest love story has been written; will you be a part of the happy ending?

If you have already received the love of God and you are walking with Christ, then use this sermon as a spiritual MOT. As Titus has been for the Elders, so the gospel should be for all believers. This is an opportunity to renew our praise and vigilance. Praise and thank the Lord for his saving love, for his mercy over your sins and for his gracious blessings in your life, including the gift of faith. But also let us be careful to keep ourselves alive.

Prayer

Father God, we cower at the reality of our original position with you. Our rebellious nature and our just punishment. But we rejoice in your love and what your love has won. We thank you for covering our sins and for your gracious blessings in our lives. Not least the gift of faith that sustains us every day and the new life which you have won for us here on earth

and eternally in heaven. If we don't have this already, may you open our hearts to your love. Help us to praise you every day of our lives and remain vigilant against sin. Amen