

Participation



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One of the key passages for understanding what union with Christ is all about can be found in Ephesians 2:1–10. Now this is a very famous text, well known for verses 8–9, which speak about our salvation being through grace, through faith alone. But actually at the heart of this passage is the idea of being made alive with Christ, the idea of being raised to life with Christ. This is an idea that theologians call *participation*. Participation with Christ is one of the key four images related to what union with Christ is all about. So I'm just going to trace through this passage and show how our union with Christ is really driving the way that our salvation is by faith and by grace.

¹As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ²in 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.

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So Paul begins in Ephesians chapter 2 by saying, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (v. 1). He begins by saying you were spiritually dead. You were cut off from God. You were not able to reach out to God. You weren't able to repair your relationship with God. You were spiritually dead. This is very glum of course, is a very bleak picture, but it is the first point that Paul is making here. This is because in verse 2, you used to live this way “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.” In other words, your spiritual dead state comes from living according to the rules and ways of the world, and it comes from following the evil one. Paul refers to this evil one as “the ruler of the kingdom of the air.” It's a way of speaking about the evil one, Satan. He [Paul] includes himself in this description of spiritual deadness, once being dead. In verse 3, “All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our [sinful nature] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature [objects] of wrath.”

The first three verses of Ephesians chapter 2 paint a very bleak picture for humanity, saying that all of us in our natural state—we follow the ways of the world, we follow the ways of the evil one, and we follow the ways of our own personal desires and

and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised

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cravings—all of which cut us off from our relationship with God, leaving us spiritually dead. Of course, the problem when you are dead, is that you are not able to fix your situation. You're unable to address your situation because dead people are, well, they're dead.

That first point being established leads to the second point in verse 4: "But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ." These are the key words: "[He] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." And Paul can't help himself but to insert the conclusion that he's going to unpack properly in a few verses' time, but here it is in verse 5: "It is by grace you've been saved."

So the logic here is, point one, you're spiritually dead. You're unable to repair your relationship with God. Point two, so God Himself, because of who He is, because of His love, because of His mercy, He's made us alive. We were dead; He's made us alive. But the two words that do the heavy lifting here are "with Christ." He's made us alive with Christ. That word "with" is where we really see participation. It's where we see our union with Christ.

The idea is that when Christ was raised from the dead, when He was resurrected, having been put to death on that Good Friday, that we spiritually are raised with Him. Our faith in Christ connects us to Him. We sort of hitch our wagon to His wagon so that His resurrection becomes our spiritual resurrection. Or as Peter refers to it, our rebirth, and John as well, we are born again. It's another way of saying we have been raised to new life with Christ.

But again, the point here is, it's with Christ. We have not raised ourselves from the dead. God has done this work, and how has He done it? He's done it by our union with Christ, by connecting us to Him so that His resurrection effects our new life. So, verse 4, point two: God, because He is rich in mercy, because of His love, made us alive with Christ. Therefore, it's by grace you've been saved, not by your works, because dead people are not capable of any works.

Paul goes on in verse 6 to say, "And God raised us up with Christ." There are those two words again, "[He] raised us up with Christ and seated us" . . . here it is again "with him," with Christ, "in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."

we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you

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So in verse 6, we see that “with Christ” idea appear twice more. You’re made alive with Christ—that’s resurrected with Christ. Then you’re raised up with Christ—that’s you have ascended with Christ. And then you are seated in heavenly realms with Christ—and the picture is, just as Christ was resurrected from the dead and ascended into heaven and now is seated in the heavenly realms with His heavenly Father, so those who are connected to Christ, so those who participate with Christ, are raised to life with Him, ascended with Him, so that spiritually, our location, our spiritual home, is in the heavenly realms with Christ, and we’re seated there with Him.

This is so that “in the coming ages,” verse 7, “he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” All of this has the goal that at some point in the future, we will really be able to see with a clear perspective just how amazing God’s mercy is, how amazing His love is, how extensive His grace is that’s been extended to us, that we might live with God in His dwelling place.

Then we come to the conclusion of the argument, point three, which are the famous memory verses that many people will know well. Verse 8: “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.”

Now, these are magnificent verses that teach us that of course it’s by God’s gift, by His grace that we’ve been saved. It’s by trusting in what He has done for us in Christ, not by our own deeds or our own performance, that we are made right with God, that we are saved by God. Now those verses stand perfectly well by themselves, but the point I want to make is that these are actually the inevitable conclusion of the argument that Paul has been making since verse 1 of chapter 2, because remember the logic. First, you are dead. Dead people cannot save themselves. Dead people cannot make themselves right with God. So point two, God, because of who He is, has made us alive with Christ and raised us up and seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms. So therefore, point three, you are saved by grace. You are saved by God’s initiative, by God’s gift, not by anything that we have achieved. And Paul emphasizes that by saying it’s not by our works, so that no one can boast.

Now the final point in this passage is found in verse 10, where he does talk about workmanship, but not our works, but rather God’s works. Verse 10: “For we are God’s [workmanship], created

with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

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in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The point is, it’s not about our works. It’s not what we can do, what we can achieve. It’s actually about God’s workmanship. Paul calls us His “workmanship.” We are God’s product. He has done this. He has made us, and He has created us “in Christ Jesus.” That’s more language related to union with Christ, “in Christ Jesus,” to do good works.

And so here we see that God’s intention for us is in fact that we will do good works. But this is the only time where Paul has endorsed our good works in this passage. Previously, he has emphasized that it’s not by our works (and he doesn’t call them good), but it’s not by our works that we can be made right with God, that we can be saved, because he’s emphasizing the point that it’s God’s action that makes us right. But once God has done that, and once Paul has made that clear, then he can pivot and talk about our good works. They’re our good works because God has prepared them in advance for us to do. So, even when we perform these good works, even when we do things that are pleasing to God, we can’t take credit for them because they are acts that God Himself has prepared for us “to do,” or literally “to walk in.”

So we see in this passage that it is all about God’s working for us to make us alive, and the centerpiece of God’s activity is Christ and our participation with Christ. We’re made alive with Christ. We’re raised with Christ. We’re seated with Christ, and God has created us in Christ. So truly, the heavy lifting, the central engine driving this good news, is our union with Christ. And that’s why this theme, this topic, participating with Christ is so essential for understanding the good news of the gospel.