

An Advent Prayer

“Born to Set Thy People Free”

Ephesians 2:1-10

Mark Vroegop

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 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—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:1–10, ESV)

The season of Advent is a time of reflection and anticipation. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we remember the first coming of Jesus with a longing for His second coming. Advent is a time to consider the significance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ – that He came to earth and set in motion God’s plan for redemption. And it is a time where we yearn for the final act in the drama of our salvation to begin: the restoration of all things under the rule of God.

The story of the Bible follows four major themes: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. We live in the interim between the inauguration of redemption through Jesus and the final restoration that will take place through His Second Coming. We look back at what happened in the incarnation while also saying, “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.”

We are using a Christmas hymn written by Charles Wesley in the 1700s as our outline for our time of Advent. Each line of this hymn serves as the title for the weeks of December:

*Come, Thou long expected Jesus
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us,
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's Strength and Consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art;
Dear Desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.*

Last week we unpacked Galatians 4:4-5 as it related to Jesus' arrival "when the fullness of time had come." We observed the beautiful way God orchestrated the arrival of His Son according to His sovereign plan, supernaturally intervened in our lives, gave us a personal connection to His Son, and all of this was for redemptive purposes. I walked away from Galatians 4 with the word *hope* in my mind and heart. Seeing all that God did in the first Advent helps as we live in this gap between His second coming. It helps us live in a world that needs Jesus to return.

Born to Set Thy People Free

The second line of our Advent prayer or hymn could be summarized with another word: *power*. Wesley celebrates the fact that Jesus' birth was the beginning of the end of the hold that sin and death had on mankind. His birth set the stage for spiritual freedom. He was "born to set thy people free."

But what does that really mean? In other words, what was the spiritual freedom that Jesus brought?

Ephesians 2:1-10 helps us understand this spiritual freedom. In this text Paul gives us some of the richest explanations as to the spiritual transformation that happened in Christ. Now let me give you a fair warning: this text is loaded with significant and in-depth theology. What Paul talks about here is life-changing and worship-creating. For some of you this text may be a great unpacking of what God did for you in Christ or what this season is really all about. But for others, my hope is that you might come to personally experience the freedom that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. He was born to set you free. Let me show you how.¹

The Former Bondage

"Set thy people free" from what? Ephesians 2 helps us to understand the nature of the spiritual problem that all human beings face: the bondage of our innate and natural sinfulness. This is the problem Jesus came to solve; this is the issue that created the need for the First Advent, and this is what we long for in the Second Advent.

Now you need to know that Ephesians 2 is not mainly about the former bondage. In fact, the central thought of this passage is found in verse five – "*even while we were dead in our trespasses, {he} made us alive together with Christ.*" Paul's point is to link the way in which we share in the resurrected power of Jesus, a theme that emerges in 1:19-21:

"and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." (Ephesians 1:19–21, ESV)

Paul will connect this together for us, but we have to start with the problem of our bondage.

¹ I am indebted to Clinton Arnold for his excellent exegetical outline of Ephesians 2:1-10 which I have used here – see his commentary on Ephesians in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series.

Verse one uses a very important term that serves as the main description of the spiritual problem: *“And you were dead in trespasses and sins.”* Our spiritual bondage is described as “being dead.” What does this mean?

The concept does not mean something merely physical. Paul is using the term “in the metaphorical sense of alienation from the one who gives life.”² In other words, when it comes to our spiritual relationship with God, we are spiritually dead. There is no spiritual life within us. We are alienated from God. The picture is bleak and helpless. We are natural born sinners, and the basic disposition in our souls is one of rebellion against God.

It is not by mistake that the Bible uses such a definitive term as “dead.” One cannot be partially dead or half dead. A person is either alive or dead, and the difference is profound. Paul applies this truth to the spiritual condition of men and women.

In Colossians 2:13, Paul linked this condition to the very nature of who we are: *“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh . . . (Colossians 2:13, NIV).* He uses the term “flesh” to describe the essence of who we are. In other words, human beings are fundamentally flawed at the core of our beings. Left to ourselves, we would never seek after God, never understand God, and never have the fear of God before our eyes (see Rom. 3:11-18). We would be alive physically but dead spiritually.

So the Bible paints a picture here that is pretty dark. It is a bondage to the internal inclination of rebellion against the rule and authority of God in our lives. Our bondage is spiritual deadness, the inability to do anything to merit the approval of God. What’s more, it is a deadness that causes a person to be naturally uninterested in the things of God, not desire to be like God, and not live a life blessed by God.³ This is person consumed with anything but God. This is a person who is alive physically but dead spiritually. And this is the natural condition of every person ever born (see Romans 5:12-21). Human beings are spiritually dead. That is our plight. That is our bondage.

Everything else that follows in verses 1-3 simply puts further color on this spiritual deadness. Let’s see what is here.

First, the expression of this spiritual deadness is through “trespasses and sins.” These terms should not be taken as two separate statements, as if there were a major difference between the trespasses and sins. Paul is probably linking 2:1 to 1:7 where he identifies that the purpose of Christ’s redemption was “the forgiveness of our trespasses” and he add “sins” here in order to emphasize that our spiritual deadness is not passive. Our deadness is active rebellion. We are unable to do what is right but we are fully able to do what is wrong. No wonder the Bible often describes this condition as slavery or bondage. Our deadness is *in* our trespasses and sins.

Practically, our bondage to spiritual deadness is expressed through the inability do anything *except* sin. Human beings are powerless to do anything but sin.

² Clinton Arnold, *Ephesians – Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2010), 129

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Ephesians 2 – God’s Way of Reconciliation*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 1972), 18.

Second, there are powers set against us to keep us in bondage. There is the world, the devil, and the flesh. Each of them is listed in verses 2-3:

- **The World** – verse two says, “following the course of this world.” This means that the spiritual pull of the world is set in a way that is contrary to the heart of God. The culture is set against God’s ways. The world is not a spiritually neutral place; it is hostile to God.
- **The Devil** – verse two also says, “following the prince of the power of the air.” Paul identifies that there is a real spiritual battle taking place and that the Devil is behind the landscape of culture and the lure of temptation.
- **The Flesh** – verse three rounds out the powers set against us: “among whom we all once live in the passion of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind . . .” The focus here is on the internal battle. Human beings face an enemy that comes from within. The flesh (the sinful inclination toward evil) colludes with passions and desires to lead us toward the wrong things.

Do you get the picture? The bondage of spiritual deadness is overwhelming because of the cooperation of the world, the Devil, and the flesh. The culture is biased toward sin, the Devil is constantly looking for ways to tempt people, our flesh is always ready to be tempted, and we have no power to do anything about it. But that is not all!

Finally, Paul leads us to the ultimate statement regarding the nature of our bondage: “*{We} were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*” This spiritually and hopeless condition, with the deck stacked against us, left us in a position where we were facing the wrath of God along with every other human being.

From a spiritual standpoint, human beings are in a scary place. Spiritually we are lifeless. The world is pulling us away, the devil is cheering, our flesh is cooperating, and the judgment of God is looming. This is natural condition of mankind, and it is not good. It is bondage.

But God!

The next two words in Ephesians 2:4 are two of the most glorious in the entire Bible: “But God!” With these two words, the apostle Paul highlights that the rescuer has arrived! Despite what seemed like hopelessness in our condition, the world, the power of the devil, the collusion of our flesh, and the impending judgment, there is hope! God is going to rescue His people.

Did you know that the Bible is filled with some great “but God” statements? Here are a few:

- Regarding Noah in the Ark: “*But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded.*” (Genesis 8:1, NIV)
- Regarding the evil done against Joseph: “*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*” (Genesis 50:20, ESV)

- Regarding the death of Jesus : *“And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear,”* (Acts 10:39–40, ESV)
- Regarding discouragement: *“For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus,”* (2 Corinthians 7:5–6, ESV)

You see, the Bible is filled with amazing “But God” moments. And they are all meant to show us the beauty and the graciousness of God. Human beings are rescued by God so that something about God can be seen more clearly: *“being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us”* (Eph. 2:4). God’s rescue of dead sinners is to demonstrate the beauty of His mercy and love. It is to show the richness of His mercy and greatness of His love!

So this Advent season we ought to ponder the beauty and the glory of a God who rescued us from our hopeless condition. We ought to marvel at the advent of Jesus and what it says about God’s undeserved kindness toward us. Advent should humble us, and it should create deep and personal worship as we consider what this season says about us and what it says about God.

The New Life

So what does our freedom look like? Our freedom is directly tied to the life of Jesus Christ. We share in His victory over sin and death. Our deliverance is “in Christ.”

Verse five reiterates the negative dynamic that we have just covered (it is repeated for emphasis), and then Paul hits the main point of this pericope: *“even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—”* (Ephesians 2:5, ESV)

Our spiritually dead condition was conquered by a spiritual resurrection conditioned on nothing but God’s grace. The bondage of our deadness was defeated by regeneration – the making of that which was dead to now be alive.

The phrase “made alive” is a very important concept in the New Testament. In the Greek language, it is the first of three aorist tense verbs which summarize God’s action toward us in securing our freedom.⁴ Since it is in the aorist tense, it means that this act is a completed act as opposed to something that is on-going or in the future.

The other two aorist words are found in verse six, where it says that He “raised us up with him” and “seated us with him in the heavenly places.” Both of these phrases describe the spiritual positions that Christ secures for us. In Christ we are co-resurrected and co-exalted. His victory is ours, and it is a completed, settled fact. Those who have received Christ are “in Christ.”

But regeneration – to be made alive – is the first action of God. It is the miracle of being born again; it is the rescue of God where he brings the spiritually dead to life.

⁴ Arnold, 135.

- It is what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3 - *"Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"* (John 3:3, ESV)
- It is what Peter talked about in 1 Peter 1:3 - *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,"* (1 Peter 1:3, ESV)
- It is what Titus refers to when talking about the miracle of our salvation - *"he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,"* (Titus 3:5–6, ESV)

What is the new birth or regeneration? It is God creating new life in you by means of the Spirit and on the basis of the work of Christ as you place your faith in Jesus. Regeneration involves a Spirit-born new birth (John 3:3), and it involves belief - *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life"* (John 3:36). As I understand this great moment, it seems to me that God awakens the heart, we see the beauty of the cross, and we believe.

This is the means of our rescue from bondage. This is how we are delivered from the slavery of our spiritual deadness. Jesus stands at the tomb of our empty, self-centered, God-defying living, and he calls, "Mark Vroegop, come out!" And suddenly, I hear His voice. And something within me is strangely drawn to this calling. I walk out of the tomb of my self-sufficiency into the embrace of my savior who has just rescued me from bondage that was beyond belief.

That is what it means that Jesus was "born to set thy people free"! It means that the first Advent of Jesus was the beginning of the calling of God to people loaded down by their empty living to a life of freedom, grace, and forgiveness.

What I am talking about here is not merely becoming a Christian. Regeneration means that you are a totally different person from the inside out. It means that God has set you free.

But this new life is not about you; the miracle of the new birth says something powerful about God. The new birth becomes a platform on which God displays the extravagance of his grace and the power of His mercy.

"so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:7, ESV).

Something very important becomes evident here and it is summarized for us in verses 8-9. Namely, God set us free, and our deliverance says something powerful about God. In other words, "born to set us free" means that everything that happens in the new birth is because of God's mercy, not our worth.

Therefore, the first advent reminds us that every spiritual blessing that we have is only because of the grace and mercy of God. It was grace that set us free. It was mercy that set us free. And Jesus was born to make that freedom possible.

Grace Alone

Paul brings this section to a close with a summary statement in verses 8-9. These two verses capture the essence of what Paul wants us to know about ourselves as it relates to our deliverance. And they also apply to what we see when we consider the season of advent.

Just listen to the beauty of these two verses:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV)

There are three main points here:

1. Salvation is first and foremost a gift.
2. Our works do not contribute to our rescue
3. Boasting is excluded

People are saved by grace through faith. It means that you have embraced the calling of Romans 10:9 - *“because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* (Romans 10:9, ESV)

This is the miracle of the new birth – that by believing in Jesus you have life in His name (John 20:31). This is the power of the first Advent, the moment when Jesus entered the world in order to bring about the deliverance of spiritually dead people.

So let me appeal to those of you who have never crossed the line from death to life. If today what I am saying makes sense, and if there is a longing in your soul to give your heart to Jesus, do not wait a minute longer. God may very well be calling you today out of the tomb of your self-destructive life. My hope is that you will be born again today.

And let me appeal to those of you so familiar with the words “born again” because you grew up in church, and you even know the content of the gospel. My question for you is whether or not you have truly experienced the new birth. I’m not asking if you understand the concepts of the regeneration; I’m asking if you have genuinely experienced the supernatural transformation of a new heart, new desires, new affections, and a new master.

Finally, let me remind those of you who are genuinely converted that a right understanding of your regeneration should leave you humbled and incredibly grateful. Why did God set His love on you? Why did He call your name? Why did He choose you? These questions are only answered by God Himself. But one thing you can know for sure: whatever the reason, it was not because you were worthy. Jesus was born to set you free.

And this gift of grace was so amazing, so generous, so kind, so undeserving, and yet so eternally important, that the only response is “Thank you, God!” Born to set thy people free!

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