

Our New Year's Confession (*Ephesians 2:1-10 NIV*)

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Every year around this time, people all over the world participate in something that, if we are to believe the statistics, ends up resulting in a massive collective failure.

Despite having the best of intentions and even with the strongest of motivation...

- Somewhere between 80-90% of people who make **New Year's resolutions** will not see them through to a successful end.
- In fact, here in the United states of America, it is estimated that **only 9%** of resolution makers will finish what they started on January 1st.
- **23% of people** will give up on their resolutions in the first week.
- Nearly **half will drop out** by the end of the first month.¹

A lot of these less-than-encouraging statistics are derived from resolutions that focus on physical, material goals, and sometimes relational goals.

But I wonder how much of a correlation this data would have to some of our spiritual resolutions as well. How many of us make a murky, ill-defined commitment to “pray more” in the coming year, but never really find a good way to keep the momentum going? I have lost count of how many different “read the Bible in a year plans” I have tried, but I know the exact count of how many I have ever completed. (Because it is “0”). Some of you have probably made resolutions to serve more, volunteer more, give back more, do more of this or less of that...and then sometime around December realize that time has run out.

I guess, as they say, there's always next year.

So what I will NOT be doing on this final Sunday of 2023 is telling you how to make a good New Year's Resolution to better your Christian life in 2024. I think the data would tell us maybe resolutions are not such a great strategy for growing in our faith.

Instead, I want us to consider making a ***New Years Confession***.

To enter the new year being very clear about what we as followers of Jesus believe to be true of ourselves, what we believe to be true about God, and what we believe to be true about the way we should live our lives.

To do this we'll take a look at Ephesians 2:1-10, and see how the truths found there might help us shape our faith and confidently say that we believe and confess:

We were once lost in sin.

We are now, by grace, alive in Christ.

¹ <https://fisher.osu.edu/blogs/leadreadtoday/why-most-new-years-resolutions-fail#:~:text=Researchers%20suggest%20that%20only%209,by%20the%20end%20of%20January>.

We have God-ordained, good work to do.

(And we'll do our humble best to do it)

Let's dive in and take a closer look at what it means to confess these truths in 2024.

In Chapter 2 of his letter to the Christians in the city of Ephesus, the Apostle Paul reminds his readers that all people, including those who now follow Jesus, ***were once lost and dead in our sin.***

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 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. 3 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.

Ephesians 2 (NIV)

When I was in middle school there were two rules that I was to follow with uncompromising obedience. The first was curfew. At the end of the day I needed to be through the door of our home by the previously agreed upon time. The second rule for my cell phone. If my mother called me on my 1st generation Nokia Brick with the flip down guard over the keypad, I had BETTER answer, or at least follow up quickly if I happened to miss a call. Be home on time, answer when mom calls. This was the law.

One night, I had plans to watch a movie at a friend's house. With my curfew set at 10pm and my cell phone in my jacket pocket, I walked down the street and arrived at my friend's home excited for the fun of the evening ahead. We got the movie started a little late, and as the hours rolled on I began to realize that the movie wasn't going to end before 10pm. Instead of doing something sensible, like calling my mom and asking if I could stay a little later, I decided for myself that I was only a few minutes from home so it didn't matter if I stayed out a little later than normal. So I ignored the time, ignored my phone, and did whatever I wanted.

The movie came to an end and it was time to go home. I pulled my jacket on and slipped my phone out of the pocket to check the time. It was after 10:30...but that's not what I noticed first. The time display on my phone had been pushed to a small corner by the alert that I had missed not one...not two...but FOUR calls from my mom.

The memory of my slow, doomed walk back down the street to my home is what comes to mind when I read the phrase, "***you were dead in your transgressions and sins***".

This -- but on a far more consequential and terrible scale -- is what the Apostle Paul is describing in these three verses.

It's not a physical death, but a sense of hopelessness and inevitable punishment. A realization that rebellion has a cost, and that you cannot save yourself from the judgment to come.

Our sins, our wrongdoings both premeditated and spur of the moment all contribute to our spiritual death and our alienation from God.

If you're going to understand what it means to follow Christ, to recognize him as your Savior, you have to begin from this place of realizing and admitting the need for salvation. It's uncomfortable to dwell on the topic of our disobedience, but we can't appreciate all that God has done for us if we don't first come to terms with the disaster of life we've created for ourselves. Something is terribly wrong between us and God, and we need to be able to see that so we can also see the ways He has worked to make it right again.

We have to confess:

We were all once lost in sin.

In v1-3 Paul briefly outlines what being lost to sin, what being dead in our transgressions looks like in our day to day life.

First, he says we were **dead in our transgressions and sins when we followed the ways of this world (v2).**

Scripture is full of warnings that worldliness can lead us to living a life and pursuing things that are incompatible with the will, values, and commands of God. The world beckons us to indulge the influences of greed, corruption, oppression, immortality, materialism, and the neglect of our neighbors in need. Worldliness is in conflict with a godly, righteous life because it encourages us to believe that we can make it on our own. That we are powerful. That we should be in control, that God works for us, and that we can act without consequence or concern in whatever way we want.

If you tend to hurt the people around you more than you help them, you are likely caught up in worldliness.

If you care more about proving you are right than you do about proving your love to those in need you are likely caught up in worldliness.

If your goal each day is to satisfy your desires and make sure you always get what you want, even if it means disregarding the clear teachings of Jesus Christ, then you are most definitely caught up in worldliness.

If you're hearing these questions and immediately refusing to use them for an inspection of your own actions and conscience...then yeah, you might be clinging to worldliness far more than righteousness.

A second struggle we face is **against “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”** In other words, our struggle against the enemy, against Satan, against the devil and the demonic forces of evil that stand with him is very real and very much a threat to our spiritual and eternal well-being.

The Bible regards Satan as a very real and very dangerous threat to humanity. We are told that Satan (*the ruler of the kingdom of the air*) delights in corrupting our connection to God. Satan's work flourishes in the lives of those who embrace worldliness and disobedience.

Before we excuse ourselves from this struggle against evil, notice in v.3 that Paul clearly declares these sinful afflictions as affecting *all of us*. We have all suffered from embracing the ways of the world, from the influence of evil in conjunction with our disobedience, and, as it says in v3, from “*gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts*”.

Selfishness.

Self-centeredness.

Unchecked cravings, addictions, and the insatiable desire to consume.

We sin in our flesh when we objectify something good so that we can use it to satisfy our burning desire for selfish gain.

We become gluttonous, lustful, and give ourselves over to feelings like anger, hatred, and greed.

When you lay it all out like this, it becomes frightfully easy to see just how dire our sinful situation really is. We are attacked from without by the world, from beyond and above by evil, and even from within ourselves by our own disobedience to God’s ways. Sin has caused us to possess a deeply broken and flawed nature, which Paul bluntly describes as “*deserving of wrath*” at the end of v3.

We have all done things that place us in the path of God’s righteous judgment.

This is perhaps where the truth we find in Scripture clashes the most with what the world wants us to believe about ourselves: you and I are not just fine the way we are, on our own.

We don’t get to define what is right and good about ourselves. The creation does not dictate to the creator the way things are going to work.

Yes, all people are made in the image of God, and because of that truth all people inherently have a reason to love and be loved. But the terrible tension unapologetically found in Scripture is this: despite our glorious origins as special creations of God...we are not perfect. We are not flawless. We are not free to be whatever we want to be. We are slaves in bondage to our sin. We are dead in our transgressions that we choose to continue committing over and over again. And no matter what we do, no matter how good we try to be, we’re stuck -- disobedient and doomed.

This is what it means to be *people who were lost to sin*.

BUT then, in v4, like a deep gasp of fresh air or light bursting forth in the darkness, God changes everything.

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 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. 8 For it is by grace you have

been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2 (NIV)

We are now, by grace, alive in Christ.

Those who believe in Christ, who confess their need for a Savior, who commit their lives to following him, by the grace of God, are made more alive than they have ever been before, and will be forevermore.

Yes, we all need to remember and never forget that we were totally lost and dead in our sin -- but God did not leave us alone to suffer our dark, self-made fate. The God who is rich in mercy, the God who raised Christ from the dead, the God who gives the gift of faith – that God created a way for us to be saved, and not just saved, but recreated into something so wonderfully amazing in Christ.

We are now, by the loving grace of God, alive in Christ.

Everyday we are given dozens of opportunities and options with which to define ourselves. Some are simple: the clothes we wear, the food we eat, whether we choose to drink coffee or tea in the morning. Some are more complicated, like how we go about our work or the people we meet and the relationships we create.

But what would it mean if everyday you defined yourself -- first and foremost -- as someone who has been made truly alive in Christ? What might change about your life if your motivations, decisions, and actions all began with a recognition and appreciation that your entire life is a gift made possible by grace – by the undeserved but eternally precious gift – of God?

If, by the grace of God you have been saved...could you be more patient?

If, by the grace of God you have been saved...could you choose to love others first, to believe the best in them from the beginning, instead of judging them or mistreating them or seeking to take advantage of them?

If, by the grace of God you have been saved...could you live in such a way where the influence of that grace is so obvious it speaks to people in beautiful, powerful ways?

If, by the grace of God you have been saved...how will your life be different today than it was yesterday?

How will you grow in that grace, in that love, in that mercy, in that joy tomorrow, for all the world to see?

The Apostle Paul actually has a suggestion for how to do just that. It's the last part of our New Year's Confession. We believe **we have God-ordained, good work to do** (*And we'll do our humble best to do it*).

10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for

us to do.

Ephesians 2 (NIV)

We are not on this earth to make violence, hate, or cruelty. We are not supposed to make things worse. We should not, must not do evil work that hurts or oppresses or destroys other people. We are God's handiwork -- we have been made new by God in Christ to do good in this world. As followers of Jesus we ought to be uncompromisingly, unceasing, overwhelmingly committed to and known for our good work in the world.

When we confess that **we have God-ordained, good work to do** we commit to leaving no doubt in the minds and hearts of all we meet that we see them with the eyes of God. That we love them. That Christ loves them, and died for them just as he died for us. The same Gospel that took us from lost to found, from dead to alive, can do so for everyone we meet. Our good work is to make that as plain as day.

We believe **we have God-ordained, good work to do.**

So how do we *go about doing our humble best to get that work done?* How do you go out and find the work Paul says God has already prepared for you to be a part of?

This is a bit simple but...I think you begin by asking God what good works he has made ready for you...and then you go out and try something. Maybe you get it right. Maybe not. But if your desire is to do good, I'd be willing to bet that your effort will never be wasted.

So, I challenge you all to ask yourselves ***and really, actually decide:***

What one specific "good work" might God have prepared for you to do in 2024? What is one specific way you could take your first step in doing that work? I cannot tell you what God has in store for you to do...but I can promise that He has made and is making you the perfect person to do it. You are His handiwork. Go and see what He's created you do.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe and confess:

We were once lost in sin.

We are now, by grace, alive in Christ.

We have God-ordained, good work to do.

(And we'll do our humble best to do it)

I hope and pray this confession leads us to great things for God's glory in the coming year.