

March 12

Lesson 2

GREAT

LOVE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Ephesians 4:1-6

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 2:1-10

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

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

KEY VERSE

[God] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.—Ephesians 2:5

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the basis of salvation.
2. Contrast salvation by works with salvation by grace.
3. Write a prayer of gratitude for the salvation available through grace.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Saving Ourselves
- B. Lesson Background



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- I. Past Life: Living Death ([Ephesians 2:1-3](#))
 - A. Suicidal Sin ([v. 1](#))
 - B. Devilish Disobedience ([v. 2](#))
 - C. Rebellious Children ([v. 3](#))
- II. Future Life: Exceeding Riches ([Ephesians 2:4-7](#))
 - A. Lavish Love ([vv. 4, 5](#))
 - B. Prime Seats ([v. 6](#))
 - The Best Seat*
 - C. Giant Grace ([v. 7](#))
- III. Current Life: Saving Faith ([Ephesians 2:8-10](#))
 - A. God's Gift ([v. 8](#))
 - B. Excluded Bragging ([v. 9](#))
 - C. Intended Purpose ([v. 10](#))
 - What I Get*
- Conclusion
 - A. Living with Purpose
 - B. Prayer
 - C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Saving Ourselves

Some years ago, my father and I had a disagreement that was almost fatal. We were traveling together in a borrowed car across a high mountain pass in the dead of winter. It was a bright, blustery day, but the temperature was well below freezing, and there was lots of snow on the ground. Unbeknownst to us, the car we were driving had a defective fuel gauge, and we ran out of gas. There was no cell phone coverage in this remote place. We both knew we were in trouble, for the next town with services was miles away.

My father knew that the state patrol made regular rounds on this highway, so we would eventually be spotted, but I was impatient. After about 30 minutes, I decided to walk to a service station. My father protested, advising that I would freeze to death before I reached help, but I stubbornly refused to listen.

I had walked about 50 yards when I felt him bear-hug me from behind. When I turned and saw the look of panic in his eyes, I was persuaded to return to the car. Soon a truck driver with gas stopped, shared it, and followed us to the gas station. As we drove, I realized it was farther than I had thought. I doubt I would have made it.

People like me seem to be programmed to think we can always save ourselves, that we can fight our way out of any problems, that we don't need help. How foolish we are! When this is applied to our relationship with God, the foolishness is magnified manyfold. We are doomed to destruction if we seek to save ourselves. But God has made a way we can be saved from eternal destruction—a way that does not depend on our own efforts. Today's lesson looks at one of the great texts of the New Testament in that regard.

B. Lesson Background

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is considered one of his "prison epistles," because he speaks of physical confinement as he writes (see [Ephesians 3:1](#); [4:1](#); [6:20](#)). He does not mention the location of his imprisonment, but Rome is likely. This would be the house arrest situation where we find Paul at the end of Acts, awaiting his hearing before the Roman emperor (see [Acts 28:16](#)), and therefore dates the letter to about AD 63.

Ephesus in Paul's day was a commercial hub and a Roman government administrative center, one of the largest cities. It was (in)famous for its massive temple to the Greek goddess Artemis, known as Diana to the Romans. This temple was one of the so-called Seven Wonders of the Ancient World (see [Acts 19:27](#)). Ephesus had a synagogue where Paul preached successfully for a time ([Acts 19:8-10](#)). Paul's ministry in Ephesus was one of his longest ([19:10](#); [20:31](#)).

Jews of the day had a long history of despising Gentiles. But this fact didn't seem to be nearly the problem in Ephesus that it was in other places regarding church unity. Even so, Paul took care to show that Christ had removed any necessary division between Jew and Gentile, resulting in a single body of the people of God (see [Ephesians 2:12-18](#); [3:6](#); [4:3-6](#)). Salvation for neither Jew nor Gentile was earned through keeping the Jewish law, but found in the grace of God.

In [Ephesians 1:15-23](#), which precedes today's text, Paul celebrated the implications of the resurrection of Christ. He reminded readers that the raising of Christ from the dead was a display of great power ([1:19](#), [20](#)) and that the risen Christ reigned in Heaven with his Father. Following that, he shifted the focus to the letter's readers.

I. Past Life: Living Death

(EPHESIANS 2:1-3)

A. Suicidal Sin (v. 1)

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

With the opening *as for you*, Paul moves from God's display of power in Christ to the results for humanity. As the dead Christ was brought back to life by God, God has also given us a resurrection from death.

HOW TO SAY IT

Artemis *Ar-teh-miss.*

Ephesians *Ee-fee-zhunz.*

Ephesus *Ef-uh-sus.*

Gentiles *Jen-tiles.*

The immediate result of this transaction is not immunity to physical death (such death is overcome later; see [1 Corinthians 15](#)). Rather, the new life at issue in the passage before us is spiritual in nature. Spiritual death is a consequence of our *transgressions and sins*.

Only here and in [Romans 5:20, 21](#) (as "trespass" and "sin") do the Greek nouns behind this phrase occur in such proximity to one another. It's as if Paul is making sure the Ephesians don't miss the point: we are guilty of rebellion against God, deserving of death; therefore, we are without life spiritually (see [Romans 6:23](#)).

We may not want to admit it, but we are committing spiritual suicide when we sin. Those having been made alive in Christ should entertain no longing for that previous state.

What Do You Think?

What are some practical, specific ways for a Christian to demonstrate life in Christ?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of doing, saying, and/or thinking what was not done, said, and/or thought before

In terms of not doing, saying, and/or thinking what was done, thought, and/or said before

B. Devilish Disobedience (v. 2)

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.**

Before Christ became their love, Paul's readers may have believed themselves to be free. But such was not the case. Before Christ they actually were in bondage to three closely related influences.

First, they had *followed the ways of this world*. That means they had chosen to act as if God's standards for living were not valid. Today we still hear voices that call us to selfish sin, to moral failure and dishonesty. The world wants to direct us by its standards. If we let it, we are neither free nor godly.

Paul connects this with serving *the ruler of the kingdom of the air*. Paul and his readers are acutely aware of the evil influences that attack them. The phrase *of the air* does not refer to a specific location, but to the spiritual nature of this evil. The letter to the Ephesians addresses this reality more than any other writing of Paul.

Even so, Paul is confident that Jesus has authority (and therefore victory) over all the spiritual forces that are in rebellion against God (see [Ephesians 1:21](#)). But this is an ongoing battle (see [6:12](#)). *The ruler* of these spiritual forces of evil is unnamed here, but identified as the devil later ([6:11, 12](#)). The spiritual beings who are in rebellion against God are not our friends, but seek to destroy us and keep us far from fellowship with the Lord. This leads to Paul's third element.

C. Rebellious Children (v. 3)

^{3a} **All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.**

The third element that promotes sin lies within us. *All of us* (Paul includes himself) had been driven *at one time* by personal *cravings of our flesh*. Paul clarifies by indicating that such behavior includes both *desires and thoughts*. If one's body indicates that something feels good, the person may do it despite moral consequences. If one's mind wanders far from what is pure and holy, the person may excuse himself or herself

by claiming privacy of thought life. As with the influences of the world and the devil, those mired in sinful desires think themselves to be in control, but they are not. They are slaves to passion and lust.

^{3b} Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Paul's summary of that former life includes the fact that he and his readers had been *like the rest*. This refers to all who do not yield control of their lives to Christ. The characterization of unbelievers as being *by nature deserving of wrath* is quite striking, the phrase being seen as a landmark in the New Testament (compare [Ephesians 5:6](#)). What does Paul mean by this?

First, we should note that the phrase *the rest* is inclusive. It is not just pagan Gentiles who deserve God's wrath. Jews outside of Christ do not get a pass. Without Christ, they too are children of wrath.

Second, Paul's use of the word *nature* indicates something fundamental about us. As a result of our inherent tendency to sin, "there is no one righteous, not even one" ([Romans 3:10](#)). We need not debate the possibility of living a perfect life, thereby earning our salvation. It does not happen. It will not happen. Pride, part of "everything in the world" ([1 John 2:16](#)), keeps us from admitting that we deserve God's wrath. Such was our former life: infatuated by the sinful world, beset by temptations from the evil one, and controlled by out-of-control passion for the forbidden fruits desired by body and mind.

What Do You Think?

How can we discuss God's wrath in such a way as to get a fair hearing?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With fellow believers, who accept the authority of the Bible

With unbelievers, who do not accept the authority of the Bible

II. Future Life: Exceeding Riches

([EPHESIANS 2:4-7](#))

A. Lavish Love (vv. 4, 5)

4. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,

Having characterized one's pre-Christian past as consisting of infatuation with worldly influences, devil-driven disobedience, and indulgence in sinful passions, Paul now moves the discussion to his readers' future life. This shift is signaled by movement from the "as for you" of [verse 1](#) to the *but ... God* of the verse before us.

Any hope for us must begin with God's *mercy* and *love*. Even while deserving God's wrath, people still bear his image and likeness ([Genesis 1:26, 27](#)). God has gone to great effort to save his lost image-bearers ([Luke 19:10](#); etc.).

Paul is given to large statements when it comes to the nature of God. We see a great example in the description here of God's attribute of being *rich in mercy*. This may bring to mind an image of wealth such as a pile of gold coins. God is an ultrabillionaire when it comes to mercy and compassion (compare [Romans 2:4](#); also [Ephesians 2:7](#) [below]).

Paul expands on this imagery by describing God's mercy as *his great love for us*. This may seem repetitive in English, but what is redundant to us is emphatic for Paul. He seems barely able to contain his excitement! God spends his inexhaustible supply of "golden mercy coins" on us freely and lovingly. "His love endures forever" is the repeated refrain of [Psalms 118](#) and [136](#).

5. made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Life before Christ was one of being *dead in transgressions*. But as Christ has been raised from death to resurrected life, so too are we *made ... alive* (also [Colossians 2:13](#)). We, the former children of wrath, have been given a new life, the children receiving God's great love.

The "afterthought" appearance of the statement *it is by grace you have been saved* may lead us to believe that this affirmation is somehow secondary to the thought at hand. But what is mentioned so briefly here serves two purposes: (1) it anticipates a fuller explanation of salvation by grace a bit later and (2) helps paint the fuller picture of God's attitude toward his wayward children as his *grace* is considered alongside his *mercy* and *love*.

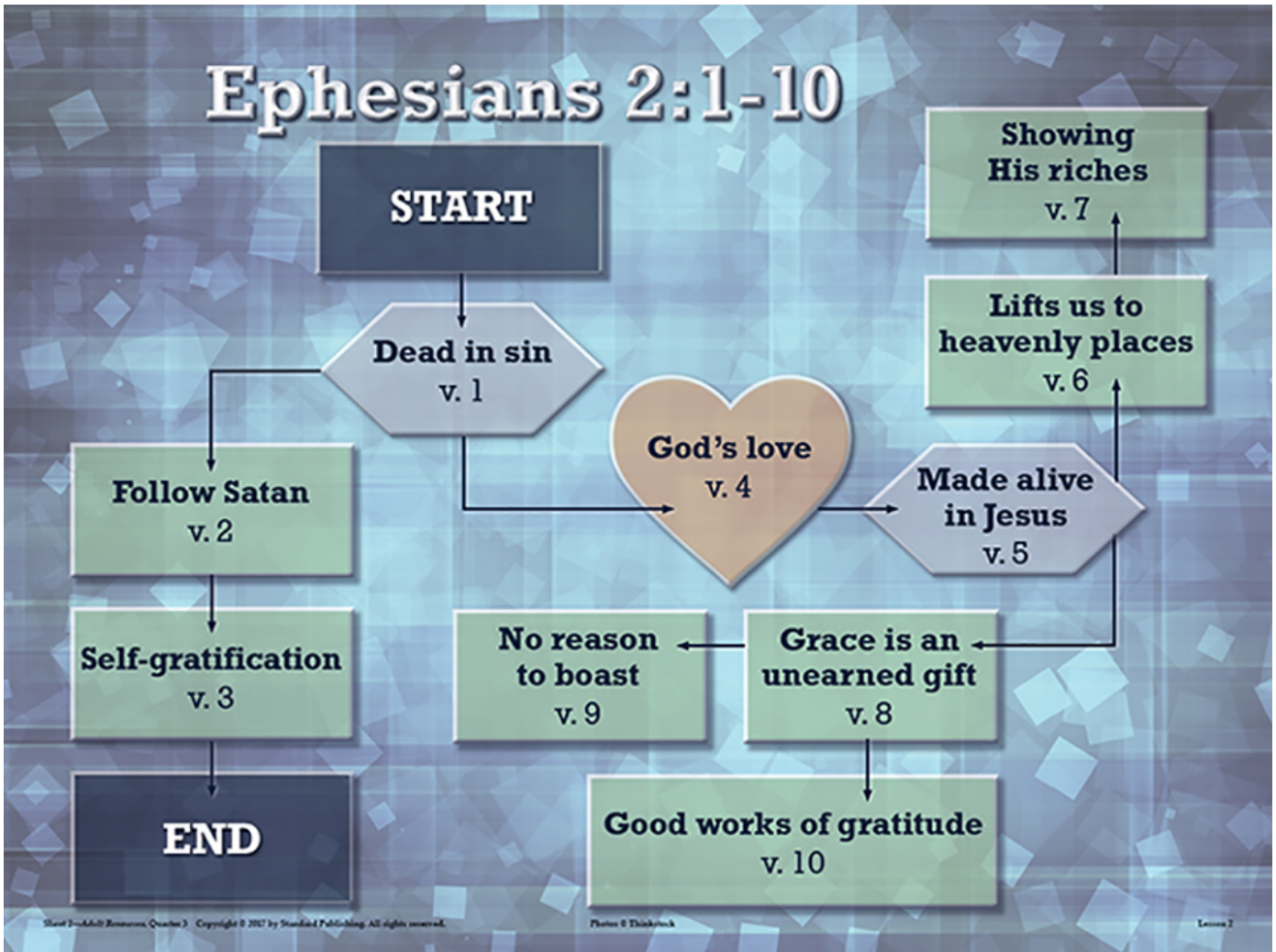
Since Paul had spent so much time with the believers in Ephesus, we can easily imagine that they hear his voice in the statement *by grace you have been saved*. Doubtless it is something he told them many times in person. This is a most fundamental thing. How salvation by grace is possible is summed up in this easily remembered acronym: Grace is God's riches at Christ's expense.

B. Prime Seats (v. 6)

6. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

Our spiritual resurrection from the death of sin is followed by an ascension. Christ ascended to Heaven after his resurrection (see [Luke](#)

24:50, 51; Acts 1:1-9; etc.), and following our resurrection from spiritual death we are positioned *in Christ Jesus in the heavenly realms* (compare Colossians 3:1-3). Believers are even pictured on thrones in Revelation 20:4. Having front-row seats in the glorious light of the presence of Christ and his victories means we no longer fear the spiritual darkness.



Visual for Lesson 2. Use this chart as a “you are here” directory for today’s lesson by pointing to it occasionally as you work through the text.

THE BEST SEAT

Vertically challenged. Shorter than the average pygmy. Squatty body.

As one reaching the five-foot-nothin’ mark on the measuring stick, I have heard all the jokes and jabs about short people.

Living at this “lower elevation” has its challenges, and if there is one thing I’ve learned over the years, it’s the need to get a good seat. The experience of attending a performance or event is greatly diminished for me whenever I end up in a bad seat because I arrive late or pay less. Many times I have not been able to see the very thing I traveled to see.

An astonishing revelation in today’s Scripture is the fact that we each have the best possible seat right now: in the heavenly realms! In Christ, the view is unobstructed, and we are spiritually able to see things from God’s point of view. Now the question is, what are we going to do with this front-row seat?—V. E.

What Do You Think?

How does the spiritual reality of being seated alongside Christ encourage and inspire you?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of confidence in the present

In terms of expectations for the future

C. Giant Grace (v. 7)

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.

Paul gives an eternal reason for God's rescue of sinners from spiritual death: that we might serve as a demonstration of his marvelous grace forever. The era that begins with salvation through faith in Christ is not an intermediate stage in God's plan. Rather, it is for all time, a plan for *the coming ages*. Again, Paul pictures God's grace as inexhaustible wealth (*incomparable riches*). To this is added the element of God's *kindness*, a word that implies essential goodness (compare [Romans 2:4](#)). *His grace, expressed in his kindness* is not God's response to anything meritorious we have done; rather, it is an offer that should draw a response from us.

III. Current Life: Saving Faith

(EPHESIANS 2:8-10)

A. God's Gift (v. 8)

8a For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—

The concept of being saved *by grace*, introduced in [verse 5](#), is now explored in greater depth. Salvation by grace expects and requires a response. The salvation God offers is of no effect unless accepted *through faith* on the part of the one who is dead in sins. Faith is often defined as "assent plus trust." In other words, assent is accepting the gospel facts as true. Trust, on the other hand, is surrendering control of one's life to Jesus on the basis of who he is and what he has done ([John 3:16](#); [Acts 10:43](#); [16:31](#); [1 Timothy 1:16](#)).

8b and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

Paul wants to be sure his readers understand that there is something they have no right to take credit for. That "something" is signaled by the words *this* and *it*, which point back to [verse 8a](#).

Here's where a technical issue of the original Greek must be considered, an issue that is not apparent in our English translation. Every Greek noun and pronoun has a grammatical gender: either masculine, feminine, or neuter. So the gender of one or both pronouns *this* and *it* in [verse 8b](#) must match the gender of one or both nouns *grace* and *faith* in [verse 8a](#) to determine the antecedent.

But there is no match. The nouns are both feminine, while the pronoun *this* is neuter. The pronoun *it* does not actually exist in the Greek text; it has been supplied in English for smooth reading.

We conclude, then, that [verse 8b](#) is not referring to any one particular element of [verse 8a](#), but to God's system of salvation as a whole. Salvation is a *gift*; it cannot be earned. We are not partners with God in bringing salvation. We are recipients of this rich *gift of God*.

B. Excluded Bragging (v. 9)

9. not by works, so that no one can boast.

If salvation resulted from our own efforts, we could be justifiably proud. Paul knows well the danger here. Before he met Christ, Paul's seemingly spotless life was a source of pride to him, evidence of his moral superiority (see [Philippians 3:4-6](#)).

But there are no *works*, no actions we can take, that make us worthy of being self-excused from our sins. The best of us still have lapses and failures; we still yield to self-centeredness and gratification of lusts. We have no room for boasting, only for humility.

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to help someone overcome a mind-set of salvation by works?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When a fellow believer has the problem but is blind to it

When a fellow believer admits to the problem

When a fellow believer embraces the mind-set and uses [James 2:24](#) to defend the position

Other

C. Intended Purpose (v. 10)

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

In the spiritual world of righteousness, then, there is no such thing as a self-made woman or man. Our spiritual resurrection is God's *handiwork*. To use another biblical image, he is the potter and we are the clay ([Jeremiah 18:6](#)).

Our new life has purpose, and this is part of God’s design. We have been rescued from spiritual destruction so that we might be instruments of *good works*. Yet we must realize that living the life that pleases God is not how we are saved. Good works are not a condition of salvation; they are the result.

What Do You Think?

How do we identify the good works that God wants us to do right now?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In light of personal desires
- In light of spiritual giftedness
- In light of needs around us
- Other

WHAT I GET

Our young speaker said it—those words often heard from ministers and missionaries who share testimonies about God’s work: “Of course, all the glory goes to God.”

The Holy Spirit must have started working in me at that moment, for I was being very honest with myself as I thought *I want some glory, some credit for some of the things I do*. My mind lit on an accomplishment I was particularly pleased about. *Ha!* I thought. *I did that!*

Then it hit me: my success had come about through various circumstances that I did not control. There was my own contribution to be sure, but the skills I brought into play were given to me through God’s design. He was the one who had set me up to succeed. The speaker was right—all the glory rightfully goes to God. Taking credit or glory for oneself is dangerous (compare [Daniel 4:28-33](#); [Acts 12:21-23](#)).

But what do I get? I still wondered. At that moment a beautiful image came to mind that answered my question. I pictured the loving Father looking directly into my eyes with pleasure as in [Matthew 25:21](#). I realized I was not equipped to handle glory. But in the end I will be lavished with something far more precious: the pleasure in his eyes.—V. E.

Conclusion

A. Living with Purpose

Having interacted with Bible college students for over 30 years, I often find them questioning their purpose in life. In counseling, we discuss life’s big questions: *Who am I? Why am I here? What should I do?* All of these are wrapped up in purpose. Here are the Bible’s answers:

Who am I? You are a beloved child of God who has disobeyed him through your sin. Yet you are now saved from the consequence of sin and from spiritual death by God’s grace.

Why am I here? You are not an accident of genetics. You are created by God to serve him and glorify his name.

What should I do? Having made peace with God through Jesus, you are ready to give your life back to him in service and love.

Sin causes us to be spiritually dead. God’s merciful grace gives us spiritual life in order that we might properly serve him in good works. If we submit to his will, he will use us in mighty ways, and our purpose in life will be clear. Is yours?

B. Prayer

God of grace and life, we are humbled when we realize that our part in our salvation is to accept it. We are amazed when we stop and contemplate your great love for us. We are excited when we anticipate your plans for us, both as instruments of your grace to others in this life and as participants in your glories in the future. In Christ’s powerful name we pray all this. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Don’t try to work for what God has already accomplished in Christ.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Before class, write on the board a list of things you can earn and things you can’t (examples: paycheck, vacation, sunset, groceries, birthday presents, trust, forgiveness, dessert, an elected position, a job, family, friends, punishment). When learners arrive say, “Which items from this

list are things you can earn?" Allow volunteers to make a case for why you can or can't earn the listed items. Circle "earnable" things as you go.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Big Change" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work individually or in pairs.

After either activity, lead into the Bible study by saying, "We are familiar with working to earn something and with receiving an unearned gift. False religions teach that a god's favor must be earned by one's works. The Bible teaches that the one true God operates much differently! Let's look at that difference and the difference it makes."

Into the Word

Before class, write these words and phrases on separate index cards (without the verse references): Dead (v. 1). Disobedient (v. 2). Sinful Desires (v. 3). Alive by Love (vv. 4, 5). Front Row Seats (v. 6). Riches of Grace (v. 7). Unearned Salvation (v. 8). Nothing to Brag About (v. 9). Given Important Jobs (v. 10).

Say, "At the time Paul wrote this letter, there was a divide in the church of Ephesus between the law-abiding Jewish people and the Gentiles who'd come to follow Christ but hadn't grown up with the law. Paul, however, communicated that sin affected everyone, just as salvation was available to everyone—that no one was more worthy of God's grace than any other. Let's see what Paul has to say about both sin and salvation."

Arrange these three headings on the board in an outline style:

I. Valueless (Ephesians 2:1-3). II. Valued (Ephesians 2:4-7). III. Value Added (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Distribute your nine index cards to students. Have someone read today's Bible text one verse at a time. If a person holding a card believes that his or her card fits that verse, have the student come forward and attach the card under one of the three headings on the board with reusable adhesive. Continue, commenting as necessary when a card is placed, until the nine index cards have been placed on the board.

Into Life

Different religions propose different views of salvation. Read the following summaries of salvation, one at a time. Have the class respond to these ideas by referring to the main points of today's Bible lesson.

Universalism: The doctrine that all sinful and alienated human souls—because of divine love and mercy—will ultimately be reconciled to God.

Deism: Human nature is essentially good, and salvation is within reach of every person through faith and good works.

Hinduism: This world is unreal. The goal of a human being is to escape this world and become one with Brahman. This happens through enlightenment gained by ritual, study, meditation, and/or good works.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Heaven Bound?" activity from the reproducible page. Say, "Think of ways you would respond to each person giving a view of salvation on that page."

Close the session after either activity by challenging students to compare their own hopes of salvation to the Bible lesson. Do they think someone can be good enough without Jesus? Do they see good works as a way to make God love them?