

Hopefully you've all already opened your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 2. Let's start at verse 1.

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. 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 – it is by grace you have been saved. And 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. 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. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

I read that from the NIV because it's the primary translation I use. But in this passage, it's let me down a little. In verse 4, the NIV says, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy." Now, the NIV hasn't let me down here by mistranslating or bringing in some heresy. This is just a small difference in sentence construction, but I feel it misses a powerful statement that nearly every other translation has in it.

If any of you were reading along with me in a different translation of the Bible, then unless it was the Message, which as always is quite different, you would have read verse 4 as beginning with the two words, "But God."

As I said, it's just a small difference in sentence construction. It doesn't affect the meaning of the verse in any way, but there is an immense power in saying those two words together, "But God". There are a number of stories in the Bible where we see these two words together, and we will look at a couple of them later, but there is no better use of them in the Bible than here in Ephesians 2 because of what Paul has written in the first three verses.

Paul describes us as having been dead in our sins and deserving of wrath. All of us, without exception. In a situation seemingly without hope. But God. Not, "but we decided not to stay lost in our sin and picked ourselves up and through hard work were able to escape sin and death." No. But God.

As humans, we all have egos. We usually like to believe we are the hero in our own story. What Paul does in those three verses is to tear down that idea to make way for the entrance of the true hero in verse 4. But God, who turns the darkest story imaginable into the greatest rescue mission in history.

You may get sick of me saying "But God" this morning, but when someone asks you what today's sermon was about, you won't be able to say you don't know, because I'm going to keep saying them, as these two words change everything.

There's something that some of you will have seen before called the bridge illustration, which people can use as a simple drawing to explain to non-Christians what Jesus did on the cross and how they can come to God as a result. I want to go through the bridge illustration and then perhaps be a bit controversial about it, but we'll get to that. First I'm going to draw it for you on this flip chart.

You start off by drawing this chasm with two sides that looks ready for Wile E. Coyote to plummet down. Then on one side of the chasm you draw a little stick man – or a woman, indicated by a triangle that looks like no dress I have ever seen – and on the other side you have God.

Next, you write mistakes in this chasm and explain that the mistakes that we made in life have separated us from God, which is the same as in any human relationship. We all at times make

mistakes that cause chasms or separations in relationships, and the same is true when it comes to God.

Some people will use the word sin here rather than mistakes, but sin can be an emotive word which makes people defensive. Most if not all people can admit that they have made some mistakes in their life though, so I think it's a better word to use here.

So then you have the question of how you can get across this chasm and become reconciled to God, and the Bible tells us that we can do nothing by our own effort to get across to God, and that the only way to bridge the chasm is the cross.

And so you draw in the cross and bridge the gap whilst explaining that when Jesus died on the cross He did so to take away our mistakes and bridge the chasm so that we can now walk across and be reconciled to God.

Before I get controversial, maybe, I want to say that I am not criticising the bridge illustration as a method of explaining the cross to non-Christians. I would happily use it just like that. However, there is a small issue that I feel needs pointing out because otherwise it can affect our view of God.

The issue comes at the end when you explain that because of the cross we can choose to walk across the chasm to God. I think it's a good way of putting it to a non-Christian because it shows them that there is a decision to be made in accepting God into their life and challenges them to consider making that decision.

But as good as that is, illustrations like this have their limitations, and I believe there is a caveat needed here to counter bad theology, because as good as the bridge illustration is, it leaves God staying on His side of the chasm waiting for us to cross over to Him, like a King sat on his throne in his castle who has let down a drawbridge for anyone who wants to come in.

This is not an accurate picture of God at the moment of the cross. In Matthew 27 verses 50 and 51 it tells us, "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."

The curtain of the temple kept the Holy of Holies apart from the rest of the temple. It could only be entered by the High Priest once a year on the Day of Atonement, and only then after having washed himself, put on special clothes and burned incense so that the smoke prevented him from seeing God appearing in the cloud, as otherwise he would die because of being a sinful man in the presence of God.

At the very moment Jesus died, the very moment that the cross bridged the chasm of sin that separated us from God, this curtain was torn in two from top to bottom.

I remember when the Berlin Wall came down. Before East Germany did so, other communist nations had been taking down their borders, until the pressure on the East German government forced them to lift the travel restrictions to the west. People were queueing to pass through the checkpoints, and if they had been British they probably would have kept queueing and tutted at anyone who tried to push their way forward.

But the East Germans weren't thinking, "I can go through to the other side of Berlin for the first time in decades. But it's a bit busy. Maybe one day next week when the queues have gone." No, they were desperate to go where they hadn't been allowed to go for nearly forty years, and even more desperate to seek out and find people they hadn't been allowed to see for nearly forty years. And so, on the very same day that the travel restrictions were lifted, the people of East Berlin started to tear down the wall and flooded across to West Berlin.

A less monumental but more personal picture of this for me comes from when I get to take my niece Eva to school. In Reception they don't line the children up outside and make them walk in in

single file. So the children are either playing or stood with whoever is dropping them off until the door opens, and as soon as the door is open they can go in.

And when the door opens all the children pick up their bags and walk in. All except one. Eva runs in as if it was Disneyland on the other side of that door. She'll give you a hug and a kiss before she goes, but once that door's open there's an urgency in her as she says goodbye to you. And when she's running to that door, if there's a crowd of people there, she's not going to wait. She's going to slalom around them. It's one of the advantages of her size.

As different as they are, I think they are both pictures of God at the moment of the cross. The veil is torn in two that very second because God did not want to be separated and confined to the Holy of Holies for a second longer than was necessary, because God was desperate to put an end to the separation between Him and us. Between Him and you.

Our God is not a God who merely sits and waits for us. Our God is a God who pursues us. In Luke 19 Jesus tells us He came to seek and save the lost. In the story of the prodigal son, we're told the father sees the son returning home while he was still a long way off. You only see someone coming a long way off if you are looking for them.

So while I have no problem with people talking about people walking across the bridge to God so that people are invited to make a choice, it's important for us as Christians to realise that to have a right picture of God we need to understand that God is not just walking across to us, but rushing across as fast as He can, and when you're the God of the whole universe, that's pretty fast.

This matters because when we view God as just waiting on the other side for us, it's easy to see Him as a distant God, and then it's just as easy to interpret what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 2 as something like this:

God created us, but we were selfish and messed everything up, so God had to sacrifice His only son so that we could live with Him in Heaven. And He did it because He's a good and merciful God, and that's what a good and merciful God does, but He's still not completely happy about it, because we still keep messing things up even after what He did for us, and that must mean He's tearing His hair out in frustration with us.

That interpretation starts off true. Then it goes just a little off the mark, while still sounding reasonable, yet before you know it, going just a little off the mark has taken you away from the truth to a dangerous degree because of the wrong picture of God it gives you.

God created us, but we were selfish and messed everything up. That part's true. But things started to go off track when I said God *had* to sacrifice His only son. God did not *have* to sacrifice His only son. No, God *chose* to sacrifice his only son because He loves us, He loves you, with a love so great, so immense that it is beyond our understanding.

And so we get even further way from the truth if we ever believe that God isn't completely happy about the situation. Nothing could make God happier than bridging that chasm that separated us from Him.

Twice in Luke 15 Jesus tells us that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. In Hebrews 12 it says that Jesus endured the cross because of the joy set before Him. That joy for God is being reconciled with us. Being reconciled with you.

Think back to some of the most joyful moments of your life. Perhaps your wedding day; the birth of a child; the moment you became a Christian; when Jerzy Dudek saved that final penalty from Shevchenko.

I promise you, the joy you felt at those moments was nothing compared to the joy God feels at being reconciled to you. God feels joy every time we connect with him. He doesn't see us as

sinner who He is frustrated with. He sees us as saints, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus.

In the Boiler Room, at the bottom of the stairs on the ground floor, there is a mirror that Jo and Gail put there which is brilliant, because it is surrounded by biblical truths about us that you can read while looking at yourself. Biblical truths which include:

- You are a child of God
- You are Christ's friend
- You are reconciled to God and are a minister of reconciliation
- You are a saint
- You are righteous and holy
- You are hidden with Christ in God
- You are chosen of God, holy and dearly loved

This is the kind of God I am talking about when I say, "But God." The God who wholly and dearly loves you, who loves nothing more than spending time with you, who pursues you.

Yet so often we live the wrong way around. Instead of living a life that says, "I was dead in my sins, but God," we live lives that say, "Yes, God is great, but my circumstances are difficult". "Yes, God saved me, but I don't like my job."

There's an old saying some Christians use. Don't tell God how big your problems are. Tell your problems how big your God is. It doesn't mean that you don't tell God about your problems. The Bible makes it clear that we should. In Psalm 55 David writes, "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you." In 1 Peter 5, Peter says you should, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

We should absolutely be bringing our problems to God. What the saying means when it says that we shouldn't tell God how big our problems are is that we shouldn't be focused on the size of our problems, but on the size of our God. Today, we need to say to our circumstances, "But God."

I'm not saying that moving from an attitude of but my circumstances to an attitude of "But God" is as always as simple as making one decision. For some of you it might be, but for others it will take a process of God working through you to bring you to that point. If that's you, will you ask me or someone else to pray with you after this sermon. Don't worry, I'll remind you later.

These two words, "But God," are mentioned a number of times in Bible, not just in Ephesians 2. Ephesians 2 is the most important and powerful time it's used, because nothing is as important as the what happened at the cross, but I want to look briefly at some other examples which show God working in people's lives.

You may remember that earlier this year we looked at Joseph. In Acts 7 Stephen is talking about Joseph, and in verses 9 and 10 he says, "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace."

"But God was with him." I wonder if Joseph always felt like God was with him? When he was sold into slavery? When he was wrongfully thrown in prison? But God saved many lives through Joseph, including the family he had been separated from.

"But God was with him." If you've given your life to God, the same God is with you today. If you haven't given your life to God, He wants to be with you today, to be reconciled with you.

There's another example of "But God" in Philippians 2, verses 25 to 27.

"But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow

soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.”

God cared enough to heal Epaphroditus, not just for Epaphroditus' sake, but also for the sake of those who loved him, including Paul, who says he was spared sorrow upon sorrow. And God still heals people today.

Some of you will remember last year when Eva was knocked unconscious in the tea and coffee room after church, and was taken by ambulance to the Children's A&E in Ormskirk. The medics weren't too worried at first because she hadn't vomited, but then she did, so they were bringing someone in to do a brain scan while Eva was drifting in and out of consciousness.

At that time Eva was obsessed with Disney Junior, and two shows in particular – Mickey Mouse Clubhouse and Jake and the Never Land Pirates. Or as it used to sound she was saying when she was smaller, Cheeky Lemon Parrots.

Eva had been promised a prize from the Disney Store in Liverpool, and she was going to go one day that week. And so in the hospital my Mum was talking to her and said, “We'll go to the Disney Store this week. Do you want Mickey Mouse Clubhouse or Jake and the Never Land Pirates?” And in a moment Eva went from lying down with her eyes rolling backwards to sitting up and saying, “I want Jake and the Never Land Pirates. I'm better now Nanny!”

Now, I know that in earthly terms you could say that the Disney Corporation has a lot of power, but not that much power. Eva didn't have a brain scan. She said it herself, she was better now. They kept her in for a few hours observation which she spent eating chips and ice cream, and watching TV.

I asked you before to think back to some of the most joyful moments of your life. One of mine is the hug I got from Eva that evening when she came out of the hospital. I've had a lot of hugs from her, and there's never been a bad one, but that one was a little bit special.

The hospital said that we had to be careful over the next day or two that Eva didn't bang her head in case there was any damage. But it's very hard to stop a three-year-old from running about, so there were a few moments of panic as we tried to slow her down. During one of these moments, I got a thought in my head, “Do you think I only did half a job when I healed her?”

Even in that situation of miraculous healing, I was still underestimating God. Even after that thought I carried on trying to protect Eva's head. You could argue that was the sensible thing to do, and it would have been reckless not to keep protecting her head. You could argue that it lacked faith.

Either way, in Ephesians 3 Paul tells us that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” It was God's power at work in us that day, because I know a lot of you were praying, and if you were praying that day, God answered your prayers. He didn't just answer the prayers of our family, or the leaders of the church. If you prayed, healing was brought about through your prayer.

If you've ever prayed over a prayer chain message and that prayer has been answered, your prayer has done that, and God wants to answer more prayers and heal more people through you. Don't ever believe that your prayer doesn't matter, that someone else's prayers are more special or better than yours. God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, His power that is at work within you.

Sometimes God answers there and then, as He did with Eva and with Epaphroditus. Sometimes it takes years before it becomes clear how God is working, as it did with Joseph. But God was with him. And God is with us. Always. And He promises He is working all things together for good in

the lives of those who love Him, even if we can't always see it.

Even though the healing of Epaphroditus from death's door was a pretty impressive "But God" moment, the biggest miracle of all is still the "But God" moment of Ephesians 2. Not just that Jesus was raised from the dead, but that we can be reconciled with God.

Jesus said He came to seek and save the lost. This is the reason we are here as a church, the reason every church should exist. To work with God in seeking and saving the lost.

This is what Jesus was talking about when He said in John 14, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these." It's not that we'll do things that seem even more impossible than walking on water or turning water into wine. It's because the thing that is even greater than what Jesus did is to have Christians spread all over the world reconciling people with God.

I know there are people in this room who have loved ones who don't know God, and that it's breaking people's hearts. Husbands and wives; sons and daughters; mothers and fathers; brothers and sisters; relatives and friends who you long to see come to Jesus.

You may have been praying for these people for a long time. You may feel that it is impossible, that there is no way they could ever come to Jesus. I have two words for you. "But God." God is with you, and God is pursuing those people, and God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.

For many of you there is a person or people on your heart right now who you long to see reconciled with God. If that's the case, I want to ask if you'll either come to the front for someone to pray with you, or ask someone you're sat near to pray with you, both for the people who are on your heart, but also for you as you witness to them and carry that burden for them on your heart.

Or maybe you are someone who doesn't know God but wants to. If that's you could you also either come down to the front or ask someone you're sat near to pray with you.

Or as I said earlier, if you feel you need God's help to live with a "But God" attitude, again will you either come to the front or ask someone for prayer.

And if people do come to the front, I want to invite others to come and pray with them. It doesn't have to be just me because I spoke this morning, and we all need to stand together as a community committed to reaching the lost.