

## **The Four Spiritual Laws of Conversion**

### **Ephesians 2:1-10**

**Introduction:** 1) In 1921 a man was born whom God would use to impact the world for Jesus Christ. His name was Bill Bright and he went to be with Jesus in 2003. He founded in 1951 a worldwide organization called Campus Crusade for Christ (now called CRU). In 1979 he launched “The Jesus Film Project” which has been translated into more than 1000 languages, becoming the most translated film in history. And, he authored in 1952 an evangelist track called “The Four Spiritual Laws” which has been translated into 144 languages and used all over the world to bring men and women, boys and girls, to Christ.

2) What are “The Four Spiritual Laws” as conceived by this Presbyterian layman?

1) God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.

2) Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life.

3) Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin. Through Him you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life.

4) We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our lives.

3) Two thoughts before moving to our text: 1) I am thankful for every single person who has been converted and come to faith in Jesus as a result of the

evangelistic tool called “The Four Spiritual Laws.” 2) If I were asked to articulate or pen an evangelistic track consisting of “Four Spiritual Laws: my track would be somewhat different than this one, grateful as I am for it. Rather, I would prefer the “Four Spiritual Laws” given to us by Paul in Ephesians 2:1-10. I like the theological precision of Paul better and I like his theological ordering better as well.

- 4) Ephesians 2:1-10 is intimately connected to Ephesians 1, especially vs. 19-23. Paul will argue that the power, “the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe” (v. 19), is the same power “that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead” (v. 20). And, it is this same power that will raise us to spiritual life in 2:4-7. Indeed we will see that our spiritual situation and circumstances were so dire and hopeless, that only this type of divine power could bring our dead souls back to life.

### **I. Spiritual Law One: apart from Christ Jesus we are spiritually dead 2:1-3**

- Paul begins immediately by addressing our spiritual status apart from Christ, before we become a part of His body, the church (1:22-23).
- 3 words can capture our condition:
  - 1) corpse (v. 1); 2) controlled (v. 2-3); 3) condemned (v. 3)
- You (emphatic) were dead: not physically but spiritually. Cause: trespasses and sins. It is as if the great physician came down from heaven and walked

over one gigantic graveyard. The cause of death of the entire human race: trespasses and sins. And yet this graveyard is an open one with living dead, “spiritual zombies,” covering the planet, walking (v. 2) the earth. Death is marked by activity in radically negative categories. Mark Dever describes our condition and conduct like this:

We walk where we should not walk.

We think like we should not think.

We go where we should not go.

We do what we should not do.

We serve where we should not serve.

We follow who we should not follow.

We obey who we should not obey.

We gratify what we should not gratify.

We crave what we should not crave.

We desire what we should not desire.

We dishonor what we should not dishonor.

- However, there is no spiritual life, no Godward impulse or inclination.
  - Total depravity: all aspects of our being infected with the deadly disease of sin. Sin is in the genes, it is our spiritual DNA.

- Total inability: morally we are not capable of responding to God. The fact is we do not want to. Our spiritual life is one of death and decay.
- Verses 2-3 help explain why our spiritual condition apart from Christ is so hopeless. Here, and only here in all of Scripture, our 3 great enemies are brought together as a controlling “trio of terror.” They are: 1) the course of the world in which we once walked or lived; 2) the prince of the power of the air, Satan, the spirit that is now (still) at work in the “sons of disobedience; 3) the passions (or lust) of our flesh which carries out the desires of both the body and the mind. How we act and think are captive to our fallen sinful nature.

1) Our lives were characterized by “the present evil age” from which Christ came to deliver us (Gal. 1:4). Our religious impulses were towards idolatries, our moral compass was fractured, our personal interest were turned in on ourselves. 1 John 2:15-17 will describe this “world system” as “the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions,” a worldview that has no place for God or eternal values.

2) We followed and were controlled by a spiritual prince, the one Paul calls in 2 Cor. 4:4 “the god of this world” who “blinds the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.” This of course is Satan, and Paul says even now this “ruler of this world” (John

12:31), this “murderer from the beginning who” has nothing to do with the truth and is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44) is at work, active, energizing, powerfully exercising his will in those whose very nature and lives are characterized by disobedience (“sons of disobedience” is a Hebraism). As present as the air we breathe so is this “prince of demons” (Matt. 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22). Peter O’Brien says we are “rebels against the authority of God who prefer to answer the promptings of the archenemy” (PNTC, 161).

3) “Among whom we all (Jew and Gentile alike) lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind” (v. 3). Paul’s argument is comprehensive. He started with our environment, moved to spiritual forces, and now addresses our human nature. His analysis is simple and sobering. Bottom-line: we were slaves to the passions, desires, lust of our fallen, sinful nature (the meaning of “flesh” in this context). We were slaves to the world system, Satan and self. It is total domination! Both our body and our mind were our tyrannical dictators. In a symphony of sin, the body and mind played in beautiful harmony to the conductor called “flesh.”

- The end of it all: we were by nature children of wrath (another Hebraism), like the rest of mankind” (v. 3). Sons of disobedience in v. 2 are now viewed rightly as children destined for wrath in v. 3. It is our nature. This is

who we are. It was our destiny. It is what we rightly deserve. Look at it anyway you like, externally or internally, naturally or supernaturally, our spiritual status could not be more tragic or hopeless.

- It is possible some might say Paul got carried away in these 3 verses and that our spiritual condition is not this bad. After all we still bear the “image of God” after the Fall. Sin damaged the image but it did not destroy it. It was defaced but not erased. And that judgment would be correct. But, a quick survey of New Testament text demonstrates the unanimous witness of our depravity and inability apart from the “new birth,” apart from “conversion.” The following is necessarily selective and not exhaustive, but I believe it will make the point.

Mark 7:7: We worshipped in vain with an air of religious superiority.

Mark 7:9: We were defiled and unclean in our hearts and lives before God.

John 3:18: We were in a state of condemnation before God.

John 3:19: We loved the darkness rather than the light.

John 3:20: We hate the light and do not come to the light.

John 6:44: We cannot come to Christ.

John 8:34: We are a slave to sin.

Romans 3:10: We have no righteousness.

Romans 3:11: We do not understand (1 Cor. 2:14).

Romans 3:11: We do not seek God.

Romans 3:12: We do not do one good thing because we do nothing for God's glory.

Romans 3:13-17: We are vicious destroyers.

Romans 3:18: We do not fear God.

Romans 6:17: Slaves to sin.

Romans 8:7: We are hostile to God.

Romans 8:7: We cannot submit to God's law.

Romans 8:8: We cannot please God.

1 Corinthians 2:14: We do not receive the things of the Spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 12:3: We cannot truly confess Christ as Lord.

Galatians 1:4: Captives of this present evil age.

Galatians 3:10: Cursed by the Law.

Galatians 5:16-18: We gratified the desires of our sinful nature.

Galatians 5:19-21: We did the works of the flesh.

Ephesians 2:12: We were separated from Christ.

Ephesians 2:12: We had no hope and were without God.

Ephesians 4:17: We were futile in our minds.

Ephesians 4:18: We were darkened in our understanding.

Ephesians 4:18: We were alienated from the life of God.

Ephesians 4:18: We had hard hearts.

Ephesians 4:19: We were sensual and greedy.

Ephesians 4:19: We practiced every kind of impurity.

Colossians 1:21: We were alienated from God.

Colossians 1:21: We were hostile in our minds towards God.

Colossians 2:21: We did evil deeds.

2 Timothy 2:26: Captives of Satan.

1 John 1:6: We walked in darkness.

1 John 1:8: We were self-deceived.

1 John 1:10: We called God a liar.

1 John 2:9, 11: We were in darkness.

1 John 2:15-17: We loved the world and not God.

1 John 3:4: We practiced sin.

1 John 3:8: We were of the devil.

1 John 3:10: We did not rightly love others.

1 John 3:14: We abided in death.

1 John 3:15: We were murderers.

1 John 4:1-6: We were captive to the spirit of Antichrist.

1 John 4:8: We did not know God.

1 John 5:21: We were idol worshipers.

**Illustration:** In 1987 a movie came out that virtually had a cult following among what was then the youth of the day. It's title: "The Princess Bride." In the movie the hero, "Wesley," is brutally tortured by the evil Prince Humperdinck." He appears to have died, but is taken to "Miracle Max" spectacularly played by Billy Crystal. Wesley's friend, Inigo Montoya, asks for a miracle saying of Wesley, "He's already dead." What follows is classic!

Inigo Montoya: "He's dead. He can't talk."

Miracle Max: "Hoo hoo hoo! Look who knows so much, heh? Well, it just so happens that your friend here is only mostly dead. There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead....Now mostly dead is slightly alive. Now all dead...well, with all dead there's usually only one thing that you can do.

Inigo Montoya: What's that?

Miracle Max: Go through his clothes and look for loose change.

Spiritual Law #1 could not be more clear, regardless what some theologians may argue. We are not good nor are we neutral. We are not some dead or mostly dead. Apart from Christ Jesus we are all dead, total dead, completely dead. We as Eph 2:12 says again, "have no hope and are without God in the world."

**II. Spiritual Law Two: With Christ Jesus we are made spiritually alive 2:4-7**

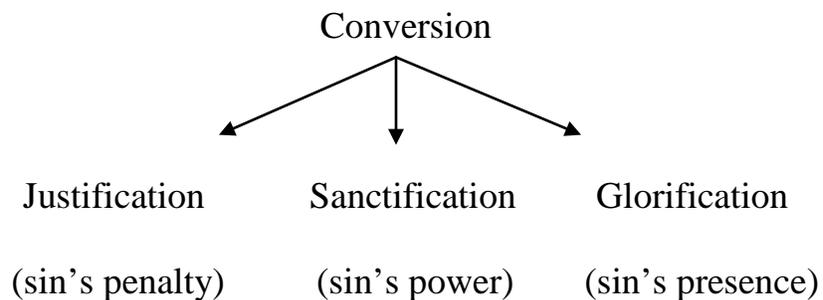
- As horrible as verses 1-3 are, verses 4-10 could not be more wonderful. Words like mercy (“rich in mercy”), love (“great love”), grace (“immeasurable riches of his grace”), saved, heavenly places, kindness, gift of God, faith and good works now dominate the conversation. Having come to a clear understanding of our sin and God’s wrath, we can now more fully appreciate and rejoice in our salvation and God’s goodness. In fact we will never appreciate our salvation and God’s goodness until we rightly understand our sin and His wrath.
- Dead people need to be made alive. Like Lazarus we need to be called forth from our spiritual grave. John Piper is correct, we were in the morgue not the doghouse. Telling dead people to try harder is like telling a corpse in a coffin to get up! We did not need an educator or therapist. We needed a Savior.
- But God in v. 4 signals the great reversal that is about to unfold. Drawing a contrast with who we were and who we have now become will make even more clear the greatness of the salvation we experience with Christ.
  - 1) Dead in trespasses and sins → Alive together with Christ
  - 2) Sons of disobedience → Raised up together with Christ
  - 3) Children of wrath → Seated together in heavenly places in Christ
  - 4) Children of wrath → Recipients of generous mercy

- 5) Children of wrath → Recipients of great love
  - 6) Children of wrath → Recipients of immeasurable rich grace
  - 7) Children of wrath → Recipients of God's kindness
  - 8) Children of wrath → Trophies of God's grace
- Even when we were dead in our trespasses and rightful objects of God's wrath, a river flowing with mercy (compassion and pity, v. 4), great love (v. 4), rich grace (v. 5,7) and kindness (v.7) rushed in our direction through Christ Jesus.
  - Several observations can be made at this point.
    - 1) The main verb of the paragraph finally shows up in the v.5 ("made us alive"). The focus is on our regeneration/conversion thru Christ.
    - 2) The same power that raised Jesus bodily from the dead in 1:20 is the same power that raises us spiritually from the dead in 2:5. The parallels are obvious and intentional.
    - 3) To my dismay and surprise the *ESV* obscures the beautiful parallelism of the Greek text that focuses on union with Christ as being at the heart of conversion. I much prefer the *NKJV* translation at this point which says God:
      - Made us alive together with Christ
      - Raised us up together and

- Made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus

4) Union with Christ must be at the heart of our doctrine of conversion / regeneration / new birth.

5) Both in verse 5 and verse 8 “by grace you have been saved” is in the perfect tense emphasizing the abiding consequences of conversion. To capture what Paul is saying we could put it like this: you have been saved (past tense), you are being saved (present tense) and you will be saved (future tense). To tease this out in theological categories, Paul shows the interconnectedness of conversion to justification, sanctification and glorification.



And all of this is ours by virtue of conversion and our union with Christ. So dominate is the thought of being “in Christ” in Paul the idea occurs almost 30 times (27 to be exact) in Ephesians alone.

Peter O’Brien once again is so very helpful as he notes who we are now in Christ:

“...the recipients of this generosity had been enemies of God and liable to his wrath (v3). But they are now in Christ Jesus, and God views them as the He views

His beloved Son. In raising and exalting Christ God demonstrates the surpassing greatness of His power (1:19-20); in raising and exalting us He has also displayed the surpassing riches of His grace” (PNTC, 172).

**III. Spiritual Law Three: Through Christ Jesus we are saved by grace through faith 2:8-9**

- The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, came into this world and lived a perfect sinless life, was put to death on our behalf as our penal substitute, bore in our place the wrath and punishment of God, and was gloriously raised from the dead in bodily resurrection from the death. That is the gospel’s proclamation.
- Now the question is, what of the gospel’s appropriation? This is what Paul addresses in vs. 8-9 and if you are here today and not a Christian, that is you have never trusted Christ personally, please pay very careful attention to what these verses teach. Now you might say well I believe in my mind what you just described. Yes, and James 2:19 tells us so do the demons.
- These 2 verses can be stated in concise statements. God extends the grace. We exercise the faith.

1) We are saved by grace, God’s unmerited favor, God’s Riches At Christ’ Expense, everything a kind and loving God does for sinners

that we do not deserve. The word “grace” occurs more than 150 times in the New Testament and almost 100 in Paul.

- 2) The instrumental means by which we experience salvation is faith, trust, reliance upon Christ and His atoning work on our behalf. Let’s be clear. We are not saved by faith but by Christ. Faith is the means whereby we lay hold of Christ. Curtis Vaughn says, “Faith is the hand that receives the gift” (p. 52), and this leads to our 3<sup>rd</sup> proposition.
- 3) Salvation is not the result of any human works, of our own doing or effort. Salvation cannot be earned. Neither moral behavior or religious activity can bring salvation life to dead sinners. Isaiah 64:6 perhaps says it best of our works, “But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are like filthy rags...”
- 4) Salvation is a gift, and indeed the grammar indicates that the whole of salvation is to be viewed as a gift. Grace is a gift. Faith is a gift. Salvation is a gift.
- 5) Because of the gracious nature of salvation as a divine gift, all human boasting is excluded, it is rendered null and void. You were not saved because you were better, wiser or more gifted than others. Your salvation, my salvation, is an act of pure grace. The only boasting

allowed in heaven is noted in Gal. 6:14, “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

- The theologian John Calvin said it like this: “In these three phrases, – not of yourselves, – it is the gift of God, – not of works, he [Paul] embraces the substance of his long argument in the Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians, that righteousness comes to us from the mercy of God alone, – and is offered to us in Christ by the gospel, – and is received by faith alone, without the merit of works” (quoted in Vaughn, 52).

#### **IV. Spiritual Law Four: In Christ Jesus we are created for good works 2:10**

- The call of the Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was clear and consistent:
  - It is faith alone that justifies but faith that justifies can never be alone.
  - We are not saved by faith plus works but by a faith that does work.
  - To reference Mark Dever at T4G 2012, the way to deal with “Fake Conversions: The Suicide of the Church” is to address both what we believe and how we live, and in that order. Mark is in good company, for that is exactly how Paul puts it in Eph. 2:8, 9 and 10.
- The God who saved us in the God who works in us and on us. We are His “workmanship” (*AMP*, “own handiwork; *HCSB*, “His creation;” *NLT*, “His masterpiece”). This word, (*Gr.* “poiema”), is only used one

other time in the New Testament that is in Romans 1:20 where it refers to the material creation. The heavens and earth certainly declare the greatness of God's material creation, but saved sinners declare the greatness of His spiritual creation. One draws attention to His glory and the other draws attention to His grace.

- Like our conversion, our spiritual growth and maturity takes place “in Christ Jesus.” As displays of God's immeasurable riches of grace (v. 7) and His work of art (v. 10), good works are simply the natural outgrowth of God's work of regeneration. Indeed these “good works” were “prepared beforehand.” It was part of God's eternal, sovereign plan that we should walk in them.
  - Once we walked according to the world-system, Satan, and our sin nature. Now we walk about in Christ and good works. The nature of these good works will be addressed more fully in 4:17-6:20. The Pastorals will address them extensively using the precise phrase “good works” repeatedly (1 Tim. 2:10; 5:10, 25; 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:21; 3:17; Titus 1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:1, 8). Jesus also addressed their importance when in Matt. 5:16 He said, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Clearly,

there is no antinomian impulse in the Scriptures. There are “gospel imperatives” that naturally follow the “gospel indicative.”

- Luther perhaps said it best, “Truly, if faith is there, he[the one justified] cannot hold back; he proves himself, breaks out into good works, confesses and teaches this gospel before the people, and stakes his life on it” (*On Good Works*, p. 41).
- And in his “An Introduction to St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans”, “Instead, faith is God’s work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God.” (John 1:13). It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn’t stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever. He stumbles around and looks for faith and good works, even though he does not know what faith or good works are.

**Conclusion:**

- In Eph. 2:12 Paul calls on the Ephesians to “remember” who and what they were before they were converted in Christ, before they “heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him” (1:13).
- The wonderful hymn-writer and minister John Newton said it so well, “I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I wish to be. I am not what I hope to be. Yet I can truly say, I am not what I once was. By the grace of God, I am what I am.” (*9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, 104).
- The hymn writer Paulus Speratus put it like this in 1516:

Salvation unto us has come  
By God’s free grace and favor;  
Good works cannot avert our doom,  
They help and save us never.  
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,  
Who did for all the world atone;  
He is our one Redeemer.

What God did in His Law demand  
And none to Him could render  
Caused wrath and woe on ev’ry hand  
For man, the vile offender.  
Our flesh has not those pure desires  
The spirit of the Law requires,  
And lost is our condition.

From sin our flesh could not abstain,  
Sin held its sway unceasing;  
The task was useless and in vain,  
Our guilt was e’er increasing.  
None can remove sin’s poisoned dart  
Or purify our guileful heart—  
So deep is our corruption.

Yet as the law must be fulfilled  
 Or we must die despairing,  
 Christ came and has God's anger stilled,  
 Our human nature sharing.  
 He has for us the Law obeyed  
 And thus His Father's vengeance stayed  
 Which over us impended.

Since Christ has full atonement made  
 And brought to us salvation,  
 Each Christian therefore may be glad  
 And build on this foundation.  
 Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead,  
 Your death is now my life indeed,  
 For You have paid my ransom.

The Law reveals the guilt of sin  
 And makes us conscience-stricken;  
 But then the Gospel enters in  
 The sinful soul to quicken.  
 Come to the cross, trust Christ, and live;  
 The Law no peace can ever give,  
 No comfort and no blessing.

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone  
 And rests in Him unceasing;  
 And by its fruits true faith is known,  
 With love and hope increasing.  
 For faith alone can justify  
 Works serve our neighbor and supply  
 The proof that faith is living.

All blessing, honor, thanks, and praise  
 To Father, Son and Spirit,  
 The God who saves us by His grace,  
 All glory to His merit.  
 O triune God in heav'n above,  
 Your have revealed Your saving love;  
 Your blessed name we hallow.