

Ephesians 2:1-10
(Deuteronomy 6:20-25; John 3:1-8)
“But God”

Introduction

Chapter one of this letter is a prayer in two parts: In the first half, Paul thanks God for what he has done to rescue us and make us his children in Christ. In the second half, Paul prays that we might know and experience this great salvation. He ends by speaking of Christ as raised from the dead and seated in the heavenly places as ruler over the cosmos and head of the church, “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (1:23).

Now, in chapter two, Paul turns to address his readers directly with the words, “And you” (2:1). In one of the best known and most often quoted passages of the Bible, Paul writes in three distinct movements. If it were a play, it would be in three acts. He first reminds us of the hopelessness of humanity apart from God’s grace. He then reminds us of the tremendous love and mercy that moved God to reach out to us even as we ran from him. Finally, he describes what God has done by grace to redeem his people from bondage to futility and death. So the contrast is between humanity by nature and humanity by grace, with the crucial connection being the love of God.

Body

- 1. “And you were dead.” By nature we are united to a humanity alienated from God (2:1-3).**

Death: Dead in trespasses and sins

Paul does not describe humanity apart from God as simply needing education or moral uplift or greater access to wealth and power, important as those things may be. He wants us to be clear about humanity’s hopelessness apart from God’s grace. And so he says, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (2:1).

He is referring back, I suspect, to the opening passages of Genesis, where God told humanity, “In the day that you rebel against me, you will die.” Humanity’s death was spiritual, and thus affected everything, because we were created to draw life through our spirit in fellowship with God’s Spirit.

A dead person cannot revive himself. Nor can humanity by nature bring back the spiritual life it lost in seeking to live life on its own terms, apart from God who is the source of life.

Futility: Following a path that leads to destruction

Spiritual death meant that humanity was set on a trajectory of futility. Paul describes it in these words, “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” (2:1-2).

We can almost hear Psalm 1 resonating in the background: “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers,” for those who walk that path “are like the chaff that the wind drives away” (Psalm 1:1&4).

We are so easily impressed by the beautiful and rich and powerful of this world, and truth be told we spend so much of our time and effort trying to be like them, but if they are simply successfully following what Paul calls “the course of this world,” they are living for nothing that will last, for nothing that will still stand in the day of the Lord, for nothing that will bring forth in that day the most crucial judgment that could ever be spoken, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23).

Bondage: Slaves of our passions and desires

The path of rebellion toward God promises freedom: “You will be like God!” (Genesis 3:5), but it leads instead to bondage, as Paul describes in these words: “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” (2:2-3).

Last Sunday, Oscar Muriu gave us an impassioned call to face up to the hidden places of our hearts, the sins that we cherish, the areas where we who have been set free in Christ continue to live as slaves. Hidden, cherished sins eat away at our souls, robbing us of integrity and wholeness, and keeping us from the liberty that God intends for his children to enjoy. The world offers freedom, but those of us who have lived a while know that the path away from God leads to bondage and addiction, guilt and shame.

Condemnation: Children of wrath like the rest of humanity

Paul summarized by saying that humanity is, by nature, deserving of God’s wrath: “and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (2:3). It is sad thing to realize that our rebellion has brought us to such a place: we who were created from intimate friendship with God, and who through that intimate friendship were intended for life and joy and peace within the love

of God, have instead run from life and love and found ourselves in a place of alienation, bondage and death, like those frightened children who run away from home, and find that the kind stranger who offered them help has turned out to be a monster who beat them, addicted them to drugs, abused them and sold them in slavery. This, Paul says, is humanity apart from the intervention of God's grace.

2. "But God." God has chosen to see us, not as we are, but as he will make us by grace (2:4-5).

Because of who he is: God sees us through the lens of his love and grace

But – thanks be to God! – God has not left humanity in such a state. Nor did he wait for us to improve ourselves or make a claim on his forgiveness and mercy. Had he done so, humanity would be without hope. "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" (2:4-5).

Do you grasp the wonder of this? While we were spiritually dead, following a futile path that leads to bondage and destruction, living in rebellion against God, God looked on us and loved us, not because of who we are by nature, but because of who he is: rich in mercy, full of love and grace, determined to show us "in the coming ages ... the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (2:7).

God's love trumps everything else, everything that would otherwise separate us from him. How can he do this? How can he forgive and embrace such rebellious prodigals? Because of who God is, and because of what Christ has done for us.

Because of what Christ has done: God sees us as united to Christ

Every blessing that Paul speaks of in this letter, and in all his letters, comes to us through our union with Christ. If we miss this, we miss everything. God is willing to forgive, because Christ has stood in our place and borne the wrath that we deserve. Every blessing that Paul will now describe of our life under God's grace is ours because of Christ alone. Thus, he writes in the often-quoted summary of the gospel, "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" (2:8-9).

All that is ours as redeemed humanity, beloved children of God, is ours in Christ. As Paul wrote elsewhere, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:22-23). Paul now

describes some key differences between life by nature and life by grace, life in Adam and life in Christ.

3. “But God ... made us alive together with Christ.” By grace we are united to a new humanity reconciled to God (2:5-10).

Life: God made us alive together with Christ

We were dead, but now are alive in Christ! “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” (2:4-5). Do you see how much more good news the gospel proclaims than merely that we are forgiven? Thank God for forgiveness of sins, but that is simply a corollary of our union with Christ. We who were spiritually dead and without hope have been made alive, alive through the indwelling Spirit of God, alive through union with Christ, alive to God’s loving, empowering presence.

Freedom: God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him

We have been set free in Christ. Paul puts it like this: “But God ... raised us up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:6). How can we who have been raised up from death in Christ go on living in bondage to futility and the passions and desires of the flesh from which we have been redeemed? And yet, remarkably, we do.

Just as a child who has been given everything at birth, all the mental and physical potential for great things, must still grow, learn, eat, study, exercise, work to develop those gifts of life, so too the new-born child of God must now pursue the means of grace – prayer, meditation on God’s Word, fellowship with other Christians, service in Christ’s name – in order to grow up in Christ and experience the reality of the freedom that is now his or hers in Christ.

Authority: God seated with Christ in the heavenly places

We now have the right to proclaim in word and deed the great good news of God’s redeeming love, and to refuse to bow the knee to the powers of this present age, whether wealth or power or prestige, or any government that demands the ultimate allegiance and obedience that belong to God alone.

In commissioning his disciples, Jesus said:

All authority in heaven and on earth is given unto me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe

all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:18-20).

Thus, we declare his Lordship in the authority that God has given to him and that he in turn has given to us as his emissaries, as those who are – even now, through our union with him – seated with him in the heavenly places.

Purpose: We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works

Note that Jesus said, “teaching them to observe,” which means, “to obey.” Faith without works is not faith at all, but mere words. When Paul wrote that we are saved by grace through faith, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast,” he did not have in view the importance of our living faithful lives, but rather he had in view the works of the law that marked one as being a faithful member of Israel: circumcision, keeping kosher, observing the calendar, a legalistic understanding of the Sabbath – all the things he fought against in seeking to bring into the New Covenant community Gentiles from every nation. Paul had once boasted in all those things and had seen them as marking him out as a faithful Israelite.

So, lest we think that we can claim God’s grace and go on living as though nothing had changed, Paul hastens to add, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (2:10). This is far too often overlooked in Christian circles that emphasize only what God’s grace has done *for* us to the exclusion of what his grace has done *in* us and aims to do *through* us.

I will say no more about this now, because I plan to return to these verses (2:8-10) next Sunday.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I simply ask you whether you have begun to grasp our desperate state apart from God’s grace, the wonder of his love toward us even in the midst of our rebellion against him, and the efficacy of his redemptive grace in providing all we need to know of the life and freedom, the authority and purpose, for which we were created.

I plead with you not to turn your back on such mercy and grace, but to receive with gratitude and joy his rich mercy and his grace that is greater than all our sin, so that you may know even today the freedom of God’s children, and “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (2:7).