

Before and After

Ephesians 2:1-10

Len Sull shares the following:

“In the late 1920s my grandparents married and moved into Grandpa’s old family home. It was a clapboard house with a hall down the middle. In the ‘30s they decided to tear down the old house and build another to be their home for the rest of their lives.

“Much to my grandmother’s dismay, many of the materials of the old house were re-used in their new house. They used old facings and doors, and many other pieces of the finishing lumber. Everywhere my grandmother looked, she saw that old house - old doors that wouldn’t shut properly, crown molding split and riddled with nail holes, unfinished window trimming. It was a source of grief to her. All her life she longed for a new house.”

After God brings us into His kingdom, we are not the same as we were before. We are new creations. Old ways of living must be dismantled and discarded. God has not only provided eternal salvation, but also, the resources to begin to live in a brand new way now. When we fail to realize this truth, or, when we fail to act upon it, we inevitably fall back into old patterns and perhaps, we even begin to doubt that there is any real newness to be enjoyed before heaven.

When Paul speaks of a believer’s standing in Christ, he does not speak in future terms. He speaks of the here and now. In *chapter one* and again, in today’s text, he speaks of our having already been seated “in heavenly realms”. Today, Christians need to trust God more in regard to what our standing in Christ already secures for us. The strength to withstand temptation depends on it. The power to mature depends on it. The ability to build up others depends on it. Our capacity together, as the church, to function as God’s light in the world depends on it. In today’s text, Paul reminds us that spiritual resources are available to us even now because of what God has already accomplished in us.

You were dead. Now, you are alive. You were a slave to the flesh. Now, you are free to pursue the image of God. You were blinded by darkness. Now, you have the light of God to illumine your path. All of this is because of the Gospel of Christ. In the text at hand, Paul is re-proclaiming the gospel not to unbelievers, but to Christians, reminding them of what is already theirs in Jesus. As he re-proclaims the gospel to his readers, he first reminds them of what their lives were like before Jesus.

I. The Walk of Death (1-3)

A. Sin Once Rendered Us Dead to God verse 1

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

Translators use two words for sin because Paul does. The first, translated “transgressions”, means a “slip or a fall”. Specific missteps are in mind, those times we stray from the straight path. Typically, we don’t get too rattled over an occasional slip-up. After all, we are prone to wander, but generally, there is no one example of our straying that numbers us with real sinners like killers, adulterers, thieves and crooked politicians. Our misdeeds are of a different flavor and severity than those folks. We think of ourselves as generally “good folks.” We forget that the Bible says that there is no one good and no one who seeks the Lord.

Perhaps, that is why Paul was so fond of the word, *hamartia*, translated here as “sins”. This word means simply, “a miss”. When “missing the mark” of everything that life could have been and should have been is called sin, that gets our attention. Benign things like wasted resources, squandered opportunities and gifts as well as our indifference to making this world a better place for others indict us. As good as we are, we are not all that we could have been for God’s glory. *Hamartia* is the word used in Romans 3:23: “...all have sinned (missed) and fall short of the glory of God.”

Paul says that our sins rendered us “dead” Does this simply mean that we had no hope to look forward to after this life – that spiritual death was our destiny? Paul probably had more than that in mind. As sinners, we lacked the capacity to find God, to relate to Him or to serve Him. A man’s finest deeds rendered toward his fellow-man may secure him a plaque or even a statue, but they accomplish nothing to bridge the chasm that keeps him from God. There is a real and spiritual condition that can only be understood as death whenever a man is shut away from Him Who is life.

B. We Were Dead Men Walking verses 2, 3

(¹As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins) ... ²in 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. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

“Live” in verse 2, means “to walk-about”. That’s vivid. We were dead men walking about. Our turf was “the ways of this world”. Without Jesus, we were shackled to the spirit of death that still enslaves this world. “The ruler of the kingdom of the air”, or Satan, is here pictured as an active presence that “works” in disobedient people. The same word for “at work” was used of the Holy Spirit just a few verses earlier in chapter 1:19, 20. Paul is probably depicting a rivalry. The Holy Spirit is at work. Satan is at work. Every value to which Jesus calls His people through the Holy Spirit is challenged by a worldly counter-value professing to be more sophisticated. That is an obvious source of tension between the church and the world, but Paul’s concern here is that believers no longer walk on that turf or listen to those voices.

Paul was addressing believers. Thankfully, this language about being dead, following the world and being headed for wrath is in the past tense. So why is he revisiting the past? It is because in the now, we can get careless. Those worldly values opposed to the Holy Spirit’s promptings agitate our minds.

The ancients taught that any man who could avenge himself and did not do so was weak. Our world agrees, and there are times when the thought of getting even does not sound as offensive to believers as it should. Plutarch said a good man was useful to his friends and terrible to his enemies. Jesus said “Love your enemies.” One point of view is heroic in the world’s eyes. The other ignores the world’s gaze to honor God. The world thrives on ambition and acquisition. The Christian faith tempers those drives with a spirit of contentment. Jesus taught the “servant”, rather than the “achiever” defines His disciple. How does that really gel with your hopes and dreams? What voices do you hear the loudest?

Paul spoke of a former life that gratified the cravings, desires and thoughts of the sinful nature or of “the flesh.” Don’t make the mistake of thinking that Paul is only speaking of seedy sensual sins. A man’s flesh is the beachhead for all of his selfish living. The fleshly man may or may not be regarded as an evil man in the eyes of the world. He may be a very popular character. What makes him fleshly is that he is not spiritual. His heart is “here and now.” His choices do not reflect any sense of eternity.

It's not easy to think as God would have us to think in this world. The devil is very active. The voices of this world are very loud. We have to pay careful attention if we hope to stay clean. Paul was preaching the gospel to people who had already received it, because hearing it again and again is a good safeguard for believers. s that not essentially the purpose behind the Lord's Table?

"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." - 1 Corinthians 11:26

For whom is this proclamation of the death of Christ intended? It is a Christian observance in the midst of a Christian assembly. Like the passage before us, the Table is a "re-proclamation" of the cross to the believer. Why preach the gospel to believers? Why reenact it in a memorial feast? The cross is an essential focus for reflection on as we attempt to remain clean in a very dirty world.

II. The Wonder of Love (4-7)

A. Christ Is How God Expressed His Love and Mercy verses 4, 5

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.

Ruin was inevitable, but God's love and mercy came through. We speak so loosely of love that the term ceases to have meaning. Ann Landers published the following from a confused romantic:

"Dear Ann: I've got to decide between the new car and getting engaged. I love the girl. But every night when I go to sleep I dream about the car. What should I do?"

Love, or *agape*, describes God's love, which is active and not primarily emotional. Love is an active force that does not stop until the one loved has been bettered, restored, or otherwise "put right." It is the love of John 3:16 that says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ..."

"Mercy" is a similarly active word. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* defines *eleos*, or mercy, as the "outward manifestation of pity for another's misery." Because God loved us, he acted in pity on us by giving us life when we were dead. Conspicuously, Paul says that God "made us alive with Christ". We are identified with the living, resurrected Christ. Again, we are not waiting to receive eternal life after we die. Jesus' resurrection authenticates that eternal life begins at the point one is in Christ. There is new life. There is power. There is victory. There is fruit born to God. We wait for a new body, but we are heirs of life right now.

B. Even Now, We Benefit From the Father's Kindnesses verses 6, 7

⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

We are raised with Christ now! We are seated in the heavenlies now! The "coming ages" refers to all points in time after the letter was originally penned. In other words, he is speaking of how the church will showcase the riches of God's grace throughout the church age. These riches include the hope of salvation, forgiveness, peace and joy. They are victory over sin. These riches transcend the ages.

The gifts of God to individual believers to carry on the work of the kingdom of God must also be considered among these "incomparable riches". God equips His church to shine as the light of the world. In Paul's day, there was a great need for prophecies, miracles, tongues and the like. Today, the gifts may differ, but the Giver never changes. First-century readers would be amazed at the incomparable riches of grace that have been manifested in the church through the centuries.

We show little imagination when we tally up the total number of spiritual gifts identified in the Bible in different epistles, toss out those that seem to have passed away with the first century and then try to pigeonhole all believers into the handful that remain. We are easily intimidated by innovations in the church, but is it not better to consider that some of this creativity may represent the ongoing of God's equipping of His people to meet the needs of the contemporary age? If we believe that we dwell in the heavenlies, then we must embrace the promise that we have resources from heaven beyond ourselves for the work of God on earth and these resources are not a handful but many

III. The Work of Grace (8-10)

A. We Are Saved *BY* Grace verses 8, 9

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -
⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

A seminary professor taught Christian grace, love and forbearance for forty years until he retired. Occupying himself in his retirement, he poured a new driveway. He went in to rest and get a glass of ice tea. Upon his return, he found the neighborhood children putting their footprints in the wet concrete. The angry professor chased the kids down in a rage. He probably would have beaten the tar out of any kid he could catch. Hearing the commotion, his wife rushed into the yard, saw the angry professor, and began to scold him: "Shame on you," she said. "For forty years you have taught love, forgiveness and forbearance. Now look at you. You've destroyed your testimony." He replied: "That was all in the abstract. This is in the concrete."

Ultimately, our salvation boils down to the free expression of God's favor toward us, that is, His grace. God is a perfect being, and our only possible standing before Him must be based on our perfection. Jesus said in the *Sermon on the Mount*, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). That's quite a predicament. God saved us by providing Someone Who is perfect to stand in our place. Our good works did not begin the process of salvation nor can they bring it to its conclusion

Works don't cut it. That much is clear. A broken law can be atoned for. A broken heart requires someone being willing to forgive. If I hurt you or yours, the law can step in and settle my debt with society. Legal guidelines can calculate some amount of restitution, but the law can never restore me to you, no matter how badly I may want that. We cannot be one until you accept my repentance and choose to forgive me. When we sinned, we broke the law of God. As a Judge, He demanded that the soul that sins must die. But, as a Father, we broke God's heart. Grace on God's part was the provision of Jesus to die in our place, God is more than a Judge meting out legal restitution. Our salvation pictures God as a Father forgiving from the heart the children who disappointed Him.

B. We Are Saved *FOR* Works verse 10

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

The word "do" in this verse is the same word translated "live" in verse 2. It still means to "walk-about". Before salvation, our turf was the ways of this world. That made perfect sense then, for we were unregenerate sinners who were dead to God and to the things of God. But now, we have a new turf. It's not walking in the clouds. It's not other-worldly spirituality. Our new turf is good works. These were prepared in advance for us by God. They are a part of the divine decree of our salvation.

After Paul establishes the uselessness of our good works for meriting salvation, he introduces good works as a part of God's eternal plan for the believer. Before the cross of Jesus, your best works on your best day could not interest God in the least. The works of sinners trying to earn God's attention are "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). Now, we are "God's workmanship". The word described a poem or a "work of art", and the divine purpose behind these new creations is good works of the Kingdom.

The works born out of grace's life are useful to God, unlike the works born out of sin's death. We do not work "for" salvation; we work "from" it as our salvation bears fruit. Works do not transform a man. They are the evidence a man is being transformed. All this talk of free grace is twisted as many place their eternal hope in an easy believism that allegedly seals them for heaven without binding them to good works. That won't fly. God will not be mocked. A man will reap what he sows. If we are indeed authentic children of the Father, we will be engaged in the Father's business for it is now our business too. It is not an option for, "As the spirit without the body is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26).

If the peace and joy that are promised you as God's child seem elusive, it may be a matter of trust. Recall Who's you are. Consider all He has invested in you. Believe that He has seated you in heavenly realms. You don't hold a position in God's family because you earned it, but because He gave you that place freely. If you understand all that, but you still know that you are living beneath your calling as a believer, may I ask, how are your works? If you're not actively serving Christ, you are missing your calling, and that may very well be why you feel so unsettled. Getting busy for the kingdom is often the best remedy in the world for all our pseudo-spiritual obsessing. To do good works is a part of the same divine, predestined decree that called you out of the world and into God's family, so who are you to denigrate their value. Peace may simply be a matter of getting to work.

© 2004 by R. Karl Crouch, 2183 Veumont Drive, Lancaster, PA