

A FAITH WORTH HAVING

Ephesians 2:1-10

These verses continue Paul's chain of thought which starts with a simple greeting (1:1f), is followed by an outburst of praise (1:3-14) which, in turn leads to one of the great prayers of the New Testament. In those verses Paul calls us to take a look at how the world really is, the reality of being in Christ, that God is at work and that we are blessed, valued and have a purpose. Because we are in Christ, because God is powerfully at work in this world and in our lives and because God has blessed us Paul never stops to give thanks for them and remembers them in his prayers (1:15-23). As we closed last time we were reminded that the power that raised Christ from among the dead is the same power that is at work in the world and in the church, which is "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" and through which "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way." (1:21f)

From these great sweeping statements, that take in the whole of creation, both the seen and unseen, Paul now turns to this small group of individuals. "As for you..." (2:1)

This passage is one of the clearest, most expressive, and most loved descriptions of salvation in the New Testament. It contains the first of five explicit 'formerly-now' contrasts, which distinguish a life of sin and alienation before Christ from a life of faith in Christ (see 2:11-13; 19-22; 4:17-24; 5:8). These contrasts constitute one of the main subjects in Ephesians.

The number of opposites in this passage is striking: living in transgressions and sins *versus* living in good works prepared by God; this world *versus* the heavenly realms; death *versus* life; sinful nature *versus* union with Christ; wrath *versus* mercy and salvation; under the 'ruler of the kingdom of the air' *versus* seated with Christ; by nature *versus* by grace; not from works *versus* through faith.

Most of the major themes of Paul's salvation theology are present in 2:1-10. In fact, 2:8-9 (or better, 2:8-10) has often been singled out as the most effective summary we have of the Pauline doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. Whether a continuation of the prayer in chapter 1 or the beginning of a new section describing Christians, this section provides foundational theological ideas on which the rest of the letter is built. The past, present, and future of God's salvation in Christ are all in view here.

The former way of life (2:1-3)

Looking back at the Ephesians' previous life, Paul gives a bleak description of what it means to be without God and without hope (2:12). He uses two paradoxes to describe this state – dead in sin and living in sin, together with following the evil one and following our own desires. Being dead refers to being separated from God. We are created to live in loving, intimate fellowship with God (Genesis 1:27; 2:4ff). When that fellowship does not exist we are dead. We may keep moving around, making plans, having hopes and dreams, but we nevertheless dead in every way that really matters. Yet we are also alive. We live in relation to others. We are rational and accountable, but we confirm our deathly status by following our own ways, the ways of the world and the ways of the evil one.

This leads Paul into his second paradox. It is a three-cornered paradox that has been the source of much discussion over the centuries. Why are we dead in transgressions and sins? Is it because of our own fallen, broken nature, a personal choice to turn our back on God? Or is it because we live in a fallen world and are overwhelmed by the downward pressures of our present age? Or is it because there is a powerful enemy, dragging us down and away from God? Paul's answer is, 'Yes'. We do have an enemy, we are under relentless pressure, we do make bad choices, but in the final analysis we are responsible for our own actions.

Two brief points need to be added here. Firstly, we should be careful not to over *read* or over *react* to 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air' (2). In Greek thought the 'air', that is the space between the earth and the heavens, was the domain of spirits and demons. We do not think that way and it would be wrong to try to read a theological description into these words. The Bible teaches, and Paul believed in, a personal being who leads the battle against God, but he did not believe, and nowhere does the Bible teach, that this being

is somehow on a par with God. The idea of two supreme beings fighting it out in the theatre of this world is thoroughly Greek philosophy and is to be rejected. Paul is using what was for him contemporary imagery, but he does not follow contemporary belief. We often face the same challenge, something we need to remember when we are trying to communicate the never-changing Good News to an ever-changing world.

Secondly, we need to think Biblically about God's wrath (3). Many Christians today proclaim a wrathful God, and many more believe that the fall in worldly standards (and probably church attendance) is because we have lost our nerve when it comes to declaring God's wrath. The problem is that much teaching on the wrath of God has no basis in Scripture. Don't get me wrong, God will judge the world, and God becomes angry with those who persist in transgressions and sins. He will bring punishment on those who oppose him, but you will search Scripture in vain if you look for a wrathful, angry God. The Old Testament never describes God as wrathful or angry by nature. Certainly, God is provoked to anger by certain action, but such wrath is always the result of an assault on his holiness. The Old Testament statement of faith clearly claims: "The LORD [is] a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." (Exodus 34:6, see also Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3) Undoubtedly he "by no means clears the guilty", but is our emphasis the same as Scripture? A similar pattern appears in the New Testament. Paul never describes God as an angry God. God becomes angry but any understanding of God's anger or wrath must be seen alongside his grace, mercy and love.

Ultimately, of course, we turn to Jesus for a true picture of God, and here is the clearest view. Yes, Jesus is quite capable of becoming angry, but his anger is always tinged with sadness, always directed at restoration and always seen against the background of his love. If to look at Jesus is to see God some of our theological imbalances need to be challenged.

God's salvation in Christ (2:4-7)

In contrast to the hopeless state of the nonbeliever, Christians exult in hope because of God's incredible grace and free salvation. Paul sets this grace in contrast to the pre-Christ hopelessness analyzed in 1-3. Paul says we were

dead (1) but now we are made alive (5). Paul tells us both why and how he has achieved this. The why is linked to what we have already been thinking about: “Because of his great love for us... rich in mercy... even when we were dead in transgressions... he might show the incomparable riches of his grace” (4, 7). Here Paul sets out the driving-force behind God’s plans and actions. No wonder Scripture testifies, “God is love!” (1 John 4:8) Paul’s estimation is that we are all sinners, dead to God and deserving wrath, but God is merciful and does not treat us according to our sins (Psalm 103:10). He sums this up, briefly: “it is by grace you have been saved.” (5) He will return to this shortly.

Paul also tells us how our rescue from death to life is accomplished. We are, “made alive with Christ” (5), “raised us up with Christ” and “seated... with [God]... in Christ” (6). For Paul there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Jesus reverses the power of death, the world and the evil one. Paul has mentioned this earlier in this letter when he reminds the Ephesians the God raises Christ from death and seats him in the heavenly realms (1:20). It is this same power that is now at work in us.

Salvation by grace explained (2:8-10)

In the last three verses of this section Paul returns to his aside in 2:5. He has already made it clear that we are saved by grace and grace alone. In 8 he extends our understanding of how this grace works in us – it is through faith. Faith is the means by which we appropriate and experience God’s grace. Faith is active trust and belief displayed through obedience. It is not mere intellectual or cognitive acceptance of a proposition. In the Old Testament faith is the same as faithfulness, and involved living the whole of life within the gracious covenant of God. New Testament faith changes that in that we are no longer called to covenant faithfulness but faith in Christ (a distinction that was the source of much friction in the early church).

We should be careful to note, however, that we are not saved *by* faith. We are saved *by* grace, *through* faith. Salvation is an unearned and unearnable gift, no one can boast that they have done anything to earn or even aid God’s saving grace (see Paul’s letter to the Galatians). Only once in the New Testament do we read of anyone being saved by faith. In Luke 7:50 Jesus says to the woman who gatecrashes Simon the Pharisee’s dinner party, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Here it seems that Jesus means that

her outward acts of faithfulness prove and show the validity of the grace working in her. See the parable that forms the centre of this story.

The result of this saving grace is that we are a new creation (Galatians 6:15), God's handiwork (10). The old, dead existence is gone, and a new life has begun. This new life, however, is not just a reanimation of the old life. In that old existence we did as we pleased (2). Now, created *in Christ Jesus*, we have work to do. Life has a meaning and we have a purpose (10).

Two practical questions may spring to mind at this point. Are we really as bad as Paul suggests in 1-3? Many today, many that we would witness to, would not recognise themselves in this description. They would point out that there is much that is good, honourable, beautiful and praiseworthy in this life. Yes, there is suffering, pain and ugliness to be found, but that is not all. Isn't Paul, and those who preach the same message, simply a pessimist?

It is true that we need to keep our eyes open to all that is going on in the world, and give thanks to God for the good as much as we may pray over the bad, but we must remember that Paul is not talking generally here. He is referring to our being dead in transgressions and sins. There is a blindness that covers our eyes. It is not a blindness that stops us from distinguishing ugly from beautiful, but prevents us from seeing God, from experiencing him and so cutting us off from him. Even when all is going well, if there were no injustice, no pollution, no illness, no ugliness in the world at all, if we were cut off from God we would still be dead. Only in Christ is there life.

A second, and related question is can things really be as good as Paul describes in 4-7? Is God really so loving and gracious? Is he really so powerful? To this question Scripture has only one answer: Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him (Psalm 34:8).

Amen.

Kevin Dare

Beeston Baptist Church

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