

God's New Society

Message 4

Raised from the Dead

Ephesians 2:1-10

Introduction

Tonight we are surrounded and infiltrated by an enemy who is bent on our destruction. He is an enemy of invincible power and fool-proof strategy. He is worse than terrorists or nuclear missiles or epidemics. There is some hope, however slim, of escape from such enemies, but no man ever won an encounter with this enemy. His success rate is 100% Who is this enemy? Death is the ultimate enemy of the human race. From the moment of birth death stalks us. Some he captures soon after birth. Some escape for a while but are run down by an automobile while playing ball in the street. Others are pierced by a gangster's bullet or crushed by industrial machinery. Some live to 80, or 90, or beyond – but all fall prey to the triumph of death.

My brother called me last Thursday and said my father was very ill and I should come soon. I arrived Friday night, and Saturday Daddy was in full health! My trip was a pleasant rather than mournful one. I do not get to see my father and brothers more than a few times a year, but I can always drive the 3½ hours to Maryland and visit them. But one day death will seize them, and then there is no trip that will enable me to see them. Death's shock lies in its finality. Now, I can renew family acquaintances and build new memories – but death cuts those off. All we are left with is memories of the past which steadily fade into oblivion. Death ultimately destroys all we love.

Society of the Dead

When Paul turns from his description of Jesus' power and majesty to the condition of man, he yanks us from the pinnacle of human imagination to the depths of hopelessness. Jesus is the one who is "far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named", but we are those who are dead. We were not physically dead – the rest of the paragraph is about how God saved us. We were dead in trespasses and sins. In other words, we were spiritually dead. Before we believed in Christ we were dead spirits in live bodies. Such is the case with everyone who does not believe in Jesus. All unbelievers are spiritually dead, no matter how alive their bodies seem to be.

Paul elaborates this point by saying we "walked according to the course of this world". (Ephesians 2:2) The NIV translates it as, "you followed the ways of this world". Paul adds that we also followed "prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" – an obvious reference to Satan. This whole world is corrupted by Satan, and it works its evil influence into everyone who enters it. Satan is the spirit who leads men into disobedience and thus encourages whole societies toward wickedness. We were once part of this. Not only were we born into a wicked society, not only were we surrounded by evil – we actively pursued evil of our own volition. Our union with this evil society was not primarily being located in it, but sharing its desires and goals. We were part of Satan's world because we shared his dreams and aspirations.

Furthermore, we indulged the lusts of our flesh. In other words, we joyfully satisfied whatever desires for pleasure possessed us. Some of us loved popularity, so we cultivated the admiration of others. Some of us loved acclaim, so we labored for excellence in sports or music or academics, and basked in the glow of our achievements. Some of us loved power, so we bullied or manipulated others. Some of us lusted for human flesh, so we fornicating freely. Some lusted for food, so we gluttonously gorged ourselves. Whatever we loved, we freely pursued. And if someone got in the way, we punished him so he would not do it again.

Paul concludes that we were children of wrath. This is not what God created us for! God created us for holiness and righteousness, as we shall see in Ephesians 4:24. God created man in His own image – not in Satan’s image. God created man for obedience, not for disobedience. God created man for His own glory – not for man’s glory. Man has rebelled against God. He refuses to obey his creator and Lord, he refuses to live in holiness and righteousness. Man rushes to imitate Satan and glorify himself. And if God gets in the way, man will kill Him so he may pursue his own pleasure. Man is in open rebellion against God, and he will die.

The situation of mankind is similar to Saddam Hussein’s. Hussein raped and pillaged the people of Iraq. He refused to live by any standards of decency. He built palaces and bought women like apples – and if anyone tried to limit his pleasure, he killed him. Wrath was upon Saddam Hussein. There was going to come a day when he would pay for his crimes. It was just a matter of time, but that day would come – and then there would be no escape. Similarly, the whole human race is in open rebellion against God, and we will pay for our crimes. It may not happen today or tomorrow, but judgment is inevitable – and when it comes, no one will escape God’s wrath.

You were dead in your sins. You did not sin by accident or in ignorance. You sinned because you loved to sin. You longed to indulge yourself and glorify yourself. Thus you were spiritually dead. There was no spiritual life in you. You did not serve God any more than a corpse serves tea. You were immersed in a whole culture of death. All around you reeked of death and judgment, and you delighted in the aroma – for it pleased you. You were a member of the society of the dead.

Raised from the Dead

At this point you may be wondering, “Why did I bother to come out here tonight to hear this miserable tale? It would have been more fun to stay home and study Japanese.” Well perhaps – but having vividly described our previous condition, Paul goes on to explain the wonders of our present condition. The contrast is stark – total. Paul goes from black to white, and there is no gray in between. Before we were dead. Now we are alive. We have been raised from the dead! We were born dead spirits in live bodies. Now we are spiritually alive. All that came with spiritual death has passed away. The rebellion against God, the lust for pleasure, the drive for personal glory – all these elements of death have been replaced by life – eternal life – the life that only God can give. Most important, this means that we are no longer under God’s wrath. Judgment no longer hangs over our heads. We live in the freedom of adoption. No longer children of wrath, we are now children of God.

Why would God do this? Why would He make us alive? There is nothing in us or the world that should have prompted Him to do so. God does not need us. He is the totally self-sufficient one. He even has fellowship and love within the trinity. So why would He choose to make us alive? Because He loves us. Note carefully that God did not make us alive because we were lovable. God’s love originates within Himself and overflows to us. Saint Augustine said salvation is sharing in the love of God which originates in the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This love spills out into the world and embraces us. We do nothing to call it forth.

Moses said the same thing to Israel in Deuteronomy 7:7-8

“The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; ⁸ but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

We were likewise unlovable, but God loved us anyway. In Romans 5:6-8 Paul said,

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

We were ungodly, dead in sins, openly rebelling against God. There was nothing good in us. But God loved us anyway. Who can fathom such love?

But there is more! If we were writing this story, we would have the sinner take the lowest place in the kingdom – at least until he proved himself worthy of some recognition. But this next phrase will knock you off your feet if you understand it. In verse 6 Paul says God “made us sit together in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus”. Do you understand this? Do you see the cosmic implications of this phrase? Where is Jesus seated? In the heavenlies – that other dimension that God created and which overlaps the world we see. It is that alternate universe Christ is building – the new heavens and new earth that we shall inhabit when this one perishes. Do you know what it means that Christ is seated there? It means He is enthroned and ruling the universe. If this is not obvious, turn to Hebrews 12:2. “...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus is seated next to God’s throne, on His own throne. Revelation 4:2 clears up any lingering doubts. It begins, “Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne,” and goes on to describe Jesus. Scripture teaches unambiguously that Jesus is presently ruling from heaven.

Now this passage in Ephesians teaches that we are seated with Him. Can this mean anything else than that we rule as well? Of course it does not mean that we all occupy positions of power here on earth – or that we should. It means that we all possess supreme power in the heavenly realms. Turn to Psalm 149, and let’s begin reading at verse 5.

- 5 Let the saints be joyful in glory;
Let them sing aloud on their beds.
- 6 Let the high praises of God be in their mouth,
And a two-edged sword in their hand,
- 7 To execute vengeance on the nations,
And punishments on the peoples;
- 8 To bind their kings with chains,
And their nobles with fetters of iron;
- 9 To execute on them the written judgment;
This honor have all His saints. Praise the LORD!

Could this be any clearer? God uses us, His saints, His own people, to accomplish His will among the nations of the earth. We do this in many ways. Some of us do fill positions of worldly power, but all of us may shape the destiny of the earth through our prayers.

You know what our problem is? We covered it last week. Our problem is not too much sin or too little discipline, etc. These are problems enough, but the root and heart of our problems is that we do not see straight. We get trapped in the details of life and are blind to reality. We think our lives will go better if we have better devotional lives, or eat less, or cut the porn habit, or stop sleeping through worship. And all these things are important. But if you *focus* on these things, it is like painting a rusty car, or mending a rotten fabric. There will be no real, lasting change. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would have insight. Insight is what we need. Our root problem is we have a distorted view of reality. We think sin is a bad habit,

when in reality it is a living death. We think that God saved us so we will not go to hell, when in reality God has given you royal power in the affairs of men. You worry about getting to class on time when you could be destroying the Muslim Empire and building the church of Christ in the Islamic world. You are like the person who worried about stepping in dog poop that she missed the beauty of the park where she was walking. Hear this and remember it. God has raised you from the dead and seated you with Christ on heavenly thrones. Now start acting like kings, and queens instead of spoiled children.

Saved by Grace Through Faith

Now we come to verse 8, the heart of this passage – or at least the verse that many of us memorized in Sunday School. We have been saved by grace. The word grace means “unmerited favor”. Grace is God’s kindness to us in spite of the fact that we did not deserve it. How could we? We hated Him. But God loves us anyway. To emphasize the point Paul says salvation is a gift of God. It is not something we can earn. In fact, we contribute nothing to it. How could we? We were dead. There was no way we could do anything to make God favorably disposed toward us. Did you ever see a corpse endear itself to someone? Suppose Crissy came home one day and found a corpse on her kitchen floor. It might spook her into running to Andrew’s apartment. So Andrew comes over and finds the corpse sitting at the table. Would you think it got there on its own power? No! What a foolish idea. And it is equally foolish to suppose that we who were dead in sin would have turned to God. No, God reached out to us, and raised us to live in Christ. We contributed nothing to our salvation.

“But what about faith,” you ask. Paul says we are saved by faith, does he not? No, he doesn’t. Read verse 8 again. We are saved by *grace*. We are not saved by faith. Faith is not a power that saves. You cannot come to Jesus just by believing real hard. God saves. Not you, and not your faith. Faith is the *channel* that God uses in saving you. Faith is the *means* of salvation. Faith is a mushy word. The core meaning of faith is trust. If you substitute trust, you can see that trust does not save anyone. It all depends on what you trust. Previously you trusted yourself, and now you trust Jesus. By saying salvation is through faith, Paul means to make it clear that we cannot do any good works that will save us. Only God can save us, and we will be saved only if we trust Him to do it.

So Paul concludes that no one can boast of his salvation. You did nothing. If you are saved, God did it. So you have no place to boast of your new life. This powerful truth must bring us all to our knees. We are all wretched sinners saved only by God’s wonderful grace because of His mysterious love. Who can understand this? No one. The only right response is to worship and praise your God who loves you so much.

Saved for Good Works

But we must not stop here. Verse 10 is an indispensable part of the description of salvation because it tells us the purpose of salvation. Paul says God saved us so that we would do good works. This is the goal of salvation, not the means of salvation. Dead men cannot do good works, but living beings can. Good works cannot save, because sinful men cannot do good works anymore than corpses can do any work. Sinful men may do things which help others and benefit the community, but they can do nothing which will move them toward salvation. But when we are made alive, we can and should do good works.

Furthermore, we can do *great* works! Remember Ephesians 1:3. God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ...” Remember 1:19-20. We should understand “the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power²⁰ which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places...” We act like spiritual paupers when we have the capacity to accomplish wonderful things for God. Stop selling yourself short. Stop denying the power of God in you. Begin acting like God rules the world through Christ in you, and seek great things for God.

A corollary to verse 10 is that the person who does not do good works may not be saved at all. If there are no good works, there is no salvation. Jesus warned His disciples about this. In Matthew 7:15-20 He said that you can identify a tree by its fruit. If the fruit is bad, the tree is bad. If your life is self-centered, if you are pursuing personal glory, how can you think you are saved? In John 15:1-6 Jesus said that the unfruitful branches of the vine will be cut off and burned. If you cannot find any evidence of God's love in your life, beware lest you be found without salvation.

Four Conclusions

We can draw four important conclusions from this passage. These are the heart of this message, and I urge you to write these down. First, no one can do anything to save himself. Salvation is not a self-improvement program. It is not a matter of increasing the good in you and diminishing the bad. Salvation is a matter of life and death. You were born dead, rebellious, hostile to God, unwilling and unable to come to Him. We do not repent, exercise faith, do good works, etc. by our own power, for we have no power to save. We were utterly helpless in our sin.

The second conclusion is that God does everything necessary to save us. He planned our salvation, He came in the flesh and died to redeem us, He adopted us, He came in the Spirit to call us and make us His. If anyone will be saved, God must act, and He does. God moves us to repent and believe, so that even faith begins with God's grace to us.

Third, God *is* acting to save people, because He loves them. This is the motive for evangelism. God loves people. As we come to life and become like Him, we begin to love people, too. And since God loves people, He is saving people. It is happening all the time. Every minute of the day somewhere in the world God is calling someone to life and saving him or her. This means that we are guaranteed of success when we tell people about Jesus. Not everyone will believe, but some will. Guaranteed. We are not hoping, hoping, hoping against hope that someone, somewhere will believe. We do not try to coax faith out of people. Nonsense. We energetically, joyfully tell people about Jesus because we know God is saving many, and we want to be involved in the process. God's love for the world and His power in salvation guarantee that people will believe.

Our fourth conclusion is that whoever is saved will do good works. Good works are not what save you, but they are the inevitable result of salvation. If your life is unchanged, you are a fraud, an imposter.

Application

If this passage is true, we will be moved to apply it in several ways. First, we should pray for our friends who do not know God. They are helpless in their sin. They can not and will not come to God. But God will hear your prayers. Did you hear me? Have you been listening the past half hour? I said God *will* hear your prayers. Only pray without ceasing. Do not give up. Keep praying for your parents and siblings and friends. Your father who rules over all will not ignore your pleas. Your unbelieving friends cannot save themselves, but you can plead with God to show them the same mercy He showed you.

The second application is to share Christ with others. Tell them about Jesus, and tell them what the Bible says about sin and salvation. Isaiah 55:10-11 says,

For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there, But water the earth, And make it bring forth and bud, That it may give seed to the sower And bread to the eater,
¹¹ So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.

This is a promise you can hold onto. This is a scripture you can bring before God in prayer. It

means that whenever you tell others the gospel, God's power is at work. You can unleash that power by telling your friends the good news of salvation from sin. As you do, God brings the dead to life. He gives faith to people, they repent of their sins, and believe in Jesus. And God uses you to do this. Isn't that amazing?

Last, and most important, we should give praise and thanks to God for our salvation. Sometimes it seems that older Christians are less enthusiastic than new believers, but if you have a growing understanding of the depths of your sin and the glory of your salvation, you will grow more worshipful of God every year of your life. Praise and thank God in private, at Noon Prayer, with your friends, and of course with the church on the Lord's Day.

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