

THE ACT OF GOD

Ephesians 2:1-10

August 5, 2018

Paul begins this section of Ephesians by saying that, as we are, you and I are dead in sins and trespasses; now he says that God, in His love and mercy, has made us alive in Jesus Christ. So what exactly did he mean by that?

‘God in His mercy made us alive in Jesus Christ.’ It’s the center of what Christianity believes and is, and we’d better pay attention here.

Just as an aside, Ephesians is one of my favorite of Paul’s letters. It has lots of good stuff in it, and this paragraph is one of the best. This is really good. Let’s see about it.

Through what Christ did, something happened to reverse the process of life. There are three things involved in being dead in sins and trespasses. Jesus has something to do about each of them.

1) Sin kills innocence. Now, not even Jesus can give a person back their lost innocence, for not even Jesus can put the clock back; BUT what Jesus *can do* is take away the sense of guilt which lost the innocence necessarily brings with it. The first thing that sin always does is to create the feeling of estrangement between us and God. Whenever a person realizes that he or she has sinned, they are oppressed with the feeling that they dare not approach God. When Isaiah received his vision of God, his first reaction was to say, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips. And when Peter realized who Jesus was, his first reaction was, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk. 5:8).

Ah, but Jesus begins by taking that sense of estrangement away. Suppose there was a son or daughter who did some utterly shameful thing, and who then ran away, because he or she was sure that there was no use in going home, because the door was bound to be shut. Then suppose someone came with the news that, so far from being shut, the door was still open and a welcome was waiting at home. What a difference that news would make! It was just that news that Jesus brought. He came to take the sense of estrangement and guilt away, by telling us that God wants you and me, just as we are now. Nice, huh?

2) Sin kills the ideals by which we live. The story is told of an engineer in a river ferry-boat. His boat was old and he did not worry over much about it, and the engines were soiled and grimy and uncared for. Then this engineer was soundly converted. Well, the first thing he did was to go back to his ferry-boat and polish the boat's engines until every part of the machinery shone like a mirror. One of the regular passengers commented on the change. "What have you been up to?" he asked. "What set you cleaning and polishing these old engines of yours?" Sir, " answered the engineer, "I've got a glory."

That's what Christ does for a person. He gives you and me a glory. The grace of Jesus Christ rekindles the ideals which repeated falling into sin had extinguished. And by that rekindling, life is set climbing again.

And (3), best of all, Jesus Christ revives and restores and recreates the lost will. There is a fatal and deadly thing about sin, in that it slowly but surely destroys a person's will, that the indulgence which began as a pleasure became a necessity, that a person's sins sap their strength of will and forges chains that bind us helplessly.

Jesus Christ revives and restores and recreates the lost will. That, in fact, is what love does. The effect of a great love is always a cleansing thing. When a person really and truly falls in love, there enters into their life a greater love than the love of their sins. The new love opens them to goodness. He or she loves the loved one so much that the love of their sin is overcome and broken. That is what Christ does for you and me. When we love Him, that very love recreates and restores our will towards goodness. As the hymn puts it,

*"He breaks the power of canceled sin
He sets the prisoner free"*

Ok, you and I were dead in our sin, but God, in His great love, made us alive in Jesus. Now here comes the heart of the Gospel, the center point of all Christianity:

*For by grace you have been saved through
faith, and that not of yourselves;
It is the gift of God; not as a result of works,
that no one should boast.*

*“For by grace you have been saved through
faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the
gift of God.”*

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!! Paul insists that is by grace that we are saved. We have nothing to do with our salvation. We have not earned it, and we never could have earned it. It is the gift of God, and all that you and I can do is to accept it in the faith that this free offer of God is true.

Saved only by a gift of God. This is undeniable. And it's unarguable. And it's true for at least two reasons. (a) God is perfection, and nothing that you or I could do ever bring would in any way satisfy the perfection of God. Nothing that finite, sinning, human beings can do can ever earn or win or merit or deserve the approval and the favor of God of infinite holy goodness.

Only perfection is good enough for God, and we, by our very nature, our very stuff—atoms and molecules and matter strung together—cannot bring perfection to God. Even if a person was not a sinner, if ever a person would make their way to God, it always has to be God who gives and you and I who receive.

(b) But there is more than that. There is a second reason that Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:8 and 9 is undeniable and inarguable. And that is the great conception that God is love. Sin is therefore a crime, not against law, but against love. Now, it is possible to make atonement for a broken heart. And sin is not so much breaking God's as it is breaking God's heart. Suppose we break some law; we can pay the penalty, either the fine or the imprisonment which the law lays down, and then the law has no further claim on us. We are free from the law.

But suppose we break someone's heart; we can never atone for that. If someone does something absolutely awful to you, how can they make that right? Think of the news broadcasts that are fresh in our minds.

Think of the video from Syria where fathers are carrying the bodies of their dead children who have been struggling to breathe against a nerve gas that is burning their lungs, a battle that that child has lost. How could a person ever atone to that child's mother, to that child's grandparents?

Think of the children that have ripped away from their mothers by our government, an act of unconscionable cruelty where they can't and won't find ways to reunite babies and infants with their mothers because our government has deported the parents. How could you ever atone to that mother for the forcible kidnap of her babies and children? It brings tears to my eyes to just think about this enormity.

I think of all the crimes in the world, all the violence and hurt, but it's crimes against children that I can't forgive. There's just no reason and no room for that, and—now this lousy and unchristian, and sinful in itself but I feel it – I want people who hurt children to suffer. Horribly. Slowly. Badly. There is nothing they can do to atone and make it right to me. Nothing.

Get this. The fix in the relationship has to be forgiveness from my side. Forgiveness from side of the one who was hurt. The guilty cannot atone for their cruelty or violence of killing or the pain they've caused you. There's no way they can atone. Nothing in the world would do. The breach if it's mended at all, has to come from the one who was hurt. An act of free forgiveness from the one who was hurt. An act of free forgiveness from the one who was hurt.

And that's the way it is with God. It is not God's laws against which we've sinned. We have sinned against God's heart. And therefore only an act of free forgiveness –an act that is the grace of God – can put us back into right relationship with Him. And He does it.

*By grace you have been saved, through faith,
and even that not of yourselves;
it is the gift of God.*

Yeah, that's it, isn't it? That makes satisfying sense. No. No, that makes a dancing, joyful kind of sense. Because Jesus did that for you and me. He has made you and me alive as His free gift. And with our heads shaking in wonder, and from a gratefulness that can't help but love Him in response, all you or I have to do is accept it. It's yours. Jesus is calling your name. The door is open, His arms outstretched. He wants you home with Him. He wants you to be alive again.

Thank you, God! Amen.

