

From Death to Life: Alive in Christ

Ephesians 2:1-10 Michael Barrett March 11, 2018

Many scholars feel that today's reading is one of the best 'before and after' stories to honor the pages of our Christian Testament. To others it seems a more magnificent 'without' and then, 'with story'. Prepositions are powerful. Although its precise authorship is argued, the Letter to the Ephesians is identified as being strongly in the Pauline tradition. It mirrors Paul's deep concern with division and dysfunction in personal lives, families, communities, and especially, Christian congregations.

At the time, Ephesus is the Roman capital of Asia Minor. It straddles both important land and sea trade routes. It is one of the most prosperous and populated cities of the ancient world (225000)— it is right up there with Rome (450000) and Alexandria (300000) and Antioch (400000). One of the seven wonders of the ancient world is located nearby – the Temple of Artemis (Diana). Ephesus is also where the Christian Church, much more so than Jerusalem or Antioch, begins to emerge as a separate religion. The Church in Ephesus, however, is being torn asunder because of dissention between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This dilemma is troublesome and concern is frequently expressed in the Pauline writings. Ephesians is a statement of how God, through the instrument of Jesus, brings about reconciliation, restoration, and renewal; then institutes an entirely new universe of love and life.

Today's passage is a central part of that statement. It is a favorite of many in our reformed tradition. It is also both challenging and controversial. The language is blunt and uses terms and expressions that sound unfamiliar and even frightening to us. Consider some – “natural objects of wrath,” “ ruler of the kingdom of the air,” and “ways of the world.” Even how terms like “grace,” “faith,” and “workmanship” are used, seem foreign here. We will do well to reflect on some of those usages today as we consider what our author writes about life without Jesus, the how and why of God's action, and life with Jesus.

The life without Jesus part of the story is presented in verses 1 – 3 and focuses on three “s’s” – sin, satan, and self-centeredness. To understand any of what follows, we need to remember God’s original intention in creating us in his image. We are designed to reflect His goodness in the works we do. Sin arises from opposition to or dereliction of that purpose. Sin, in the Pauline sense, is the condition of being separated from God. It may be due to breaking God’s law, it may be due to ignoring to do what God wills, or it may be due to open rebellion against God. It happens when we place our belief and our trust in any anyone or anything but God, first. It needs forgiveness from God.

One source of transgression and sin arises when we follow the dictates and mores of contemporary culture, the ways of the world. This is sin arising from the world outside us, the temptations to accept and elevate the social and ethical value systems of the society around us, for convenience, expediency, or perceived reward. In Pauls’ time this could be traced to a desire to cooperate with Roman oppressors or compromise with challenging Hellenic culture. Our own world calls us to temper our relationship with God with the greed of consumerism, the pride of appearance, the power of popularity, the obsession with work or exclusion of others through gossip, oppression, fear, and hate, etc., etc., etc. The ways of the world are always there. The temptation to sin arises from outside and around.

Ephesians also tells us that sin can arise from beyond us. Accused is “the ruler of the kingdom of the air.” In the 1st Century, Greek cosmology held that God and the angels were located in the heavens, beyond the moon, among the sun and stars; we held the realm on earth, leaving the space between the moon and the earth as dominated by demonic activity. What is important to reflect upon here is, not the fractured cosmology, but the reality that there is in this life the presence of an external agency of evil that seeks to manipulate and control us. Many find comfort in ignoring and dismiss this reality. As the character Verbal Kint tells in the movie “the Usual Suspects,” “the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” Simple denial however, will not guarantee nor equate to extinction.

Evil may take many forms. The appearance as that objective force of evil may be that terror-inspiring satanic caricature – cloven hooves, snake tongue, forked tail, sharp horns, and claws clutching some kind of instrument of torture. One might wonder though, since, lucifer was originally an angel, if his objective appearance might just as easily be tall, dark, drop dead gorgeous, with beguiling eyes, a beckoning voice, and an expression of complete innocence. The devil will morph into what ever form tempts most. Perhaps, the devil is inside the details – using a variety of means to enslave – the various substances and instruments of addiction, psychological damage from childhood, traumatic experience, or even the systematic social, economic, or political injustices that oppress. The temptation arises from beyond us.

There is one other source from which sin arises. Unlike Flip Wilson's Geraldine Jones character we can not always be excused by claiming, 'the debil made me do dat.' I am reminded of the story of the young girl who kicked her younger brother and then pulled his hair. When her mother chided her, "Why did you let the devil make you kick your little brother and then pull his hair?" she responded, "The devil did make me kick him, but pulling his hair was my very own idea." Yes, there are those times when either the world or ruler of the air will help us shift into first gear, but through our own free will we punch it into second, third, or fourth. That's why Ephesians warns us too, of sin arising from within – gratifying the cravings of our own desires in deed and thought.

This is about much more than just irresponsible sexual behavior. Whenever we mute the voice of the Holy Spirit sounding in our consciousness or when we blind ourselves to the blessings of God around us or when we trust in doing the expedient rather than living for the eternal; then we begin to damage ourselves.

Yes, our bodies may remain virile and vibrant, our minds may stay quick with intellect and wit, we may continue to bubble with personality plus to

spare, but our soul begins to suffer. We are separating from God rather than relating to Him.

This is not to say we aren't capable of any good or that we don't deserve dignity as a human being or that we've sunk to the lowest depths we might or that God has given up loving us. That's why we have to be very careful with phrases like natural objects of wrath. The author's intent here is that God would be justified in exercising righteous wrath. Not that God does so. Remembering humankind's employment of weapons and wars, holocausts and holy wars, machine guns and mustard gas, witch-hunts and world conflagration, slavery and subjugation, imperialism and inquisition; who could blame God if He did so? How often have we chosen to be very imperfect bearers of the image in which we were created, ignoring the purpose for which we were created?

But then, into that great darkness, beginning with verse 4, the greatest good news breaks forth. 'Without' is overcome by 'With'!!!

OURS IS NOT A WRATHFUL GOD. Motivated by His great love for us and facilitated by His merciful nature, God comes to us in the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus is God's instrument of our reconciliation, restoration, and renewal. God saves the world not through handing down deserved punishment, but by gifting unearned grace.

Please note the three "WITHS."

- (1) We are made **ALIVE WITH** Jesus. Death, that powerful instrument of evil, that power that once permeated and determined so much of human life, is broken forever. Life ends not for us in death, but in eternity.
- (2) We are **RAISED UP WITH** Jesus. We share in the same sort of resurrection as he. Not one just a resuscitation experience, but transformation into an enhanced life good and great beyond our imagination.

(3) We are SEATED WITH Jesus. In heaven! We are destined to become royalty. We need to ready ourselves for ‘incomparable riches of grace.’ Think of that the next time we have a really hard day or seem to be a complete failure at something or feel excluded or misunderstood or deal with hurt, sickness, or loss. Each one of us is destined to be a royal son or daughter.

And this is gift of spiritual enlightenment and exultation into new life, this gift of forgiveness and salvation is unearned and already completely achieved. There is no going back. It now unfolds.

And the gift is achieved not by ourselves or by anything we do. Not by our works – so no boasting! Done we are told by grace –unearned and unmerited kindness, mercy, and forgiveness by God—alone. Those words still fly in the face of some practices today. Pelagianism – the fearful hope that we are reconciled with God by the number and strength of the good deeds we do is held by many as the route to salvation. Others hold onto another form of semi-Pelagianism – a hope that by having enough faith we can be reconciled to God. But faith, simply belief plus trust, is in itself also a gift from God.

This Lent we do not have to launch into a mad frenzy of make-up homework of doing good deeds to insure God’s love and forgiveness. Nor do we have to spend countless hours soul searching – do I believe? Do I really believe? Do I believe enough? Am I saved? Am I really saved? Yes we do. Yes we are. Now God wants us to act like it.

So, before everyone heaves a great big sigh of relief and scampers off home to relax in front of the TV with a martini or hot cocoa, we need to remember that last verse about our each being God’s workmanship. As Ephesians reminds us, we are created in Jesus, to do good works, which apparently God has pre-prepared a list for each of us to be working on. While we do not accept the necessity of doing good works as a means of guaranteeing salvation; we do realize doing good works as the opportunity to live out our lives as God designed us. Good works are a means of expressing the Jesus alive with us. Without proclaiming ourselves ‘Christian’ or ‘Saved’ or

boasting of being ‘Born Again,’ let us pray that by our quiet deeds our neighbors and friends might say, “I bet that person is a real Christian.” Good works are a way of exercising and extending God’s reign of love.

We are God’s “workmanship.” This term originally used in Greek is taken from the term *poiema*. It is the same term from which we derive our word poems. We are God’s poems. We are God’s works of art. That is how God thinks of us and how much God treasures us. During Lent let us seek to strive to reflect on that love and kindness. Sometimes that is realized in acts of self-sacrifice or deeds of worship or simply biblical study or greater prayer.

With Ephesians in mind, this Lent, we may wish to borrow a prayer from our 12-step brothers and sisters. In the order of worship you will find a copy of the Serenity prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr. It may help us reflect on the meaning of power and how we can trust a higher power beyond ourselves. The prayer asks us to trust that God will make things right, even things we cannot change ourselves. It asks us to pray for the courage to change things we can. It reminds us of the eternity God has designed for us. It is a great and powerful prayer in times of trouble.

Ephesians, my brothers and sisters, is important because of the things of which it reminds us. We were never designed to live damaged or destitute. We were never meant to live controlled or manipulated by forces beyond our control. We were never made to live alone, alienated, or apart. We were conceived out of love to honor, to grow in, and to serve Jesus. We are ordained to know, to aid, and to love one other and the creation entrusted to us. May we make that our Lenten practice this year. May we make that our Lenten study this year. Amen

Serenity Prayer
Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change:
courage to change the things I can;
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
taking as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His will;
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with him
forever in the next.

Amen.