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National Presbyterian Church

## Ephesians: “God is at Work – For You”

Ephesians 1:7-8, 2:1-10

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**In our Sermons through August**, we’re looking at one of the letters in the Bible written by Christian leaders to the first Christian churches within 30-50 years or so after Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

The letter we’re looking at, *Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians* was probably written not just to one church, but to a group of churches close to the ancient city of Ephesus in the western part of what is now Turkey,

Like the other 20 letters in the NT part of our Bible the letter provides remarkable evidence of “foundational Christian faith”: what the first Christians believed about Jesus and life; and about God, and themselves

Last Sunday we looked at the first part of the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Ephesians and focused on the issue of *Christian identity*: how God sees us, and wants us to see ourselves. It was an issue then *and it’s an issue now*:

In fact, our modern society spends a huge amount of time and emotional energy on this matter because everyone knows that “*How you think about yourself*,” and “*How you name and define yourself*” has a powerful impact on *the way you live your life*.

There’s a sad story told by the late Norman Vincent Peale about his walking past a Tattoo parlor and seeing a picture of one that read “Born to Lose.” He was so shocked that he went inside and asked the owner if anyone actually wanted to put those words on their body: The owner said “Well, many do!” So, still in shock, Dr. Peale to ask, “How could they do this? What kind of a person would do this?” And the owner said simply, “*Before the tattoo is on the body, it’s already in the mind!*”

Well, says Paul, in effect, in Ephesians 1, the tattoo that should be on your body and mind is NOT, and must never be, “Born to Lose,” but

- (v3) Blessed by God
- (v4) Chosen by God before the foundation of the world
- (v5) Adopted into God’s family as a child of God
- (vv6-8) Loved lavishly by God – as a person worth dying for
- (v7) Forgiven by God
- (v7) Set on a path of renewal and redemption
- (vv12, 14) Given a purpose and a future no one can take away
- (v9) Brought into the inside track of God’s plans and purposes
- (v13) Marked by God as God’s own for ever
- (v13) Lived-in, indwelt, by God’s Spirit, Christ’s living presence

Is this how you see yourself?

Are these the words engraved like a tattoo in your life and that shape your identity?

If not, then it's time for you to ask God to make it yours!, and to make this identity powerful in your life.

**So Ephesians 1 is filled with this remarkable, amazing good news!**

**Good news made all the more remarkable (says Ephesians Ch.2!)**

by the fact that *not one single bit* of this glorious identity is anything that we can ever deserve or earn, but is simply one that God chooses freely to give to us, and does despite the fact that every one of us has made a mess of life: a mess of our own making

- that we – and we alone -- are responsible for
- that we are culpable for in the sight of God
- and from which we have no internal power to escape

Listen again to verses 1-3 of Ephesians 2 and to what Paul says about this predicament:

You ALL were dead (*not just weak or wounded, but DEAD*) through the trespasses and sins in which you ALL once lived,

- following the course of this world,
- following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

ALL of us once lived among *such sins and trespasses*

- in the passions of our flesh,
- following the desires of flesh and senses,

and we were by nature *children of wrath*, like everyone else.

These are strong words! and if I were to *sum them up*, the summary would go something like this:

Every single human being without exception has *chosen to give in* to the temptation to believe *that we can live life without God*; to ignore the fact that God is like the *air we breathe*: the only ultimate source of life!

At first, this temptation may seem harmless – a little innocent choice *here or there* just going along with the crowd, doing what everyone else is doing. But pretty soon, like a destructive addiction, we get stuck; we form habits that (1) become more and more contrary to God's will; that (2) deserve his judgment; and (3) from which we have NO power to escape.

And this, implies Paul, is what the devil wants. He traps us, step by step, until we are in his clutches: not just “wounded and weakened,” but DEAD, POWERLESS! Cut off from God for ever and unable to make things right

**This is the Biblical understanding of the human predicament.**

- On the one hand – we're made in the image of God, of inestimable value, and given the power of free will.
- But on the other hand – we've used the gift of free will to turn against our maker, repeatedly walking in our own direction, creating a prison for our souls of our own making,

**Back in 2010, Dr. Stephen Prothero of Boston University wrote a book called, “God is not One.”** He has no axe to grind. He does not call himself a Christian. But what he says is this, that:

- You simply cannot say that all religions are the same!
- In particular, the main world religions do not think of the human predicament (the human or theological problem a religion believes needs to solve) in the same way as each other
- So they exist for different reasons, to solve different human problems, in ways that are obviously different!

So, **if we were followers of ISLAM**, (for example, he says) then while the diagnosis of *the human predicament*, like Christianity, is certainly *sin*, especially *the false belief* that we can “go it alone” without God in our lives (Yes! Christians hold this in common with Islam!). But while Islam believes that this sin is serious and worthy of God’s judgment and condemnation, nevertheless, Islam also believes that the solution to the predicament is *not* beyond our human reach: sin doesn’t kill us, but merely wounds and weakens us, so that we can pull ourselves together *in our own strength*, choosing to submit ourselves to God by following “the 5 pillars”

1. By trusting God’s prophet
2. By practicing the daily prayers
3. by giving alms
4. By fasting
5. by making pilgrimage to Mecca

Do all these things – and salvation is yours! It’s within your own power and grasp.

**Or**, says Prothero, **if we followed CONFUCIUS** then the human predicament or problem, would not be seen in terms of sin at all -- but in terms of *chaos*! (There’s an overlap here too with Biblical faith: God is the God of order, and sorting out chaos is a divine and human activity; see Genesis 1, 1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). The good news of Confucianism is that fixing the chaos -- finding “salvation” -- also lies very much within our power as we use our minds *to find and practice appropriate thoughts, and rituals, and etiquette that will bring order out of chaos* for individuals and society.

OR, **if we were HINDU**, he says, the predicament is the *eternal cycle of life and death and reincarnation*. And the solution is to find and practice the right kind of devotion to set us free from the end-less cycle

OR, **if BUDDHIST**, the problem is *suffering*, and what we need is the right kind of knowledge and enlightenment to lead us back out of ignorance to nirvana.

**ALL OF THESE RELIGIONS** – describe different problems that in some way we human beings can fix by ourselves -- *just so long as we find the right path or technique*. **BUT** (and this is more my point than Dr. Prothero’s) -- **NOT SO CHRISTIANITY:**

What the Bible teaches (and Paul especially. in Eph. 2) is that we’re in *too big a hole, too big a mess* -- to fix ourselves.

We’re DEAD, says God, because of our sin. Not just *wounded and weakened, or confused or ignorant*.

Which means that *unless God* takes the first step -- then there’s no way out; we cannot resurrect ourselves! *Unless God* chooses to breathe new life into us, as He did when we were born, and when Jesus was raised from the dead, then we remain without spiritual life.

**We're rather like a person drowning far out at sea:**

- no matter how hard we swim or struggle,
  - no matter how good a swimmer we are,
- we'll never make it home in our own strength.

Our only hope is for someone to help us! – to send us a boat from the shore, to bring us in, and carry us home. And then we need to have the common sense, the faith to climb into the boat, stop our splashing about, and let the boat do all the work to carry us to safety.

**And so the question is:** given our predicament, our choices, our culpability

- Is this something that God would do?
- Is this something God has done?
- WILL GOD COME TO SAVE US?

To which the answer Paul gives (in the second half of our reading)

is a resounding YES! Listen again to Ephesians Ch. 2 (*beginning again with the bad news!*)

You ALL were **dead** through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, (*what everyone else was doing*) following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

(*trapped by a power-of-evil stronger than ourselves*)

<sup>3</sup>All of us (*that is: not just all "those other" people, but US TOO!*)

once lived among them, in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we too were by nature children of wrath,

(*deserving God's judgment*) -- like everyone else.

So this is the predicament – and it's pretty bleak. BUT THEN comes (v.4).

**2:4 BUT GOD BUT God! But GOD!** (*"BUT GOD"! not, "BUT WE, when WE saw the light and changed our ways"*).

**But God who is rich in mercy**, out of the *great* love with which he loved us (*not grudgingly but passionately*) even when we were **dead** through our trespasses, (*But God does something for us that we could not do for ourselves*)

(1) made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved (the *Grace of God*)

(2) and raised us up with him

(3) and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

That is; just as God raised Jesus from the dead that first Easter, we need to see ourselves (our identity)

- as being raised by God from the dead, spiritually -- now!
- and being given a place of honor by God, in his family– at the head table in heaven -- now!

This is not just something God will do *in the future when we die!* But something God *has already done for us in Christ*, and that we have been called to believe and *receive as true* by faith!

**2:7** . . . so that in the ages to come (*forever and ever*) he might show (*to us and anyone who wants to see*) the *immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness* toward us in Christ Jesus.

**2:8** *For by GRACE you have been saved . . .*

- “By GRACE!” which means, God’s *unmerited favor, God’s unexpected favor, God’s unearned favor!*
- Grace – flowing, richly, freely, abundantly, lavishly from God’s mercy and love!
- Grace – demonstrated concretely in God’s willingness to bear our death, our rightful judgment, in *the suffering and death* of His Only Son, and then to lift us up from death by the power of Christ’s resurrection.

***This is God’s solution to our human predicament:*** God’s work, God’s initiative, God’s action, God’s power, God’s love: God’s grace -- on your behalf and mine.

***And our part?***

Well -- simply to believe it to be true, and receive it by *faith*, like a gift *and then* to allow the gift to become *such a powerful part of us, that it changes us.*

**2:8** By grace you have been saved— through faith and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works -- so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us: created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

***SO in the Christian version of things we’re not saved by ourselves, OR by anything we do, but saved only BY GOD, who does everything that’s needed*** – to set us free

- from the weakness of our wills
- from shaping our lives by slavishly copying what everyone else is doing
- from repeatedly making choices that are destructive or futile

God sets us free so He can re-create and re-shape us, with Christ’s presence and power and way-of-life instead!

This is Biblical understanding of the human predicament, and its solution from God.

***And it’s no different, really*** from our understanding of the predicament of any destructive addiction, and the place of grace and faith in any solution that leads to real deliverance and real change! Listen to this remarkable story of deliverance that **Auburn Sandstrom** tells about her life when she was 29 years old, and trapped in her fifth year of hellish addiction. She writes:

I’m curled up in a fetal position on a filthy carpet in a cluttered apartment.  
I’m in horrible withdrawal from a drug that I’ve been addicted to for several years now.

In my hand I have a little piece of paper. It’s dilapidated because I’ve been folding it and unfolding it to the point that it’s almost falling apart. But you can still make out the phone number on it.

I am in a state of bald terror. If you’ve ever had an anxiety attack, that’s what this felt like. My husband is out running the streets, trying to get ahold of some of the stuff that we needed.

And if I could, I would jump out of my own skin and run screaming into the streets to get what I need.

But right behind me, sleeping in the bedroom, is my baby boy. Now, I wasn't going to get "A Mother of the Year award." In fact, at the age of 29, I was failing at a lot of things. I had started out fairly auspiciously.

- I was that girl who had the opera lessons, spoke fluent French, and had her college paid for.
- I was that person who, when my checking account ran out, would say something to my parents and \$200 would magically appear.

But I came to the conclusion that the thing I needed to do with all that comfort -- was to destroy it. And you know, every time I've come to a major faulty conclusion in life, the man comes right after, who will help me live it out. I was 24 then, he was 40, and I was smitten, in love. And it was beautiful for a while, until he introduced me to one of his old friends, who introduced us to the drug I was now addicted to.

So, curled up on my apartment floor, I decided to get clean.

I was leading the life that was *going to lead to me* losing the most precious thing I'd ever had in my life -- which was that baby boy.

I was so desperate at that moment that I became willing to punch ~~the~~ [some] numbers into the phone.

The phone number was something my mother had sent me.

Now, mind you, I hadn't been speaking to my parents or anybody else for three, four, five years. But she'd managed to get this number to me by mail, and she said,

*"Look, this is a Christian counselor, and since you can't talk to anybody else, maybe sometime you could call this person."*

I was emaciated, covered in bruises. I was anxious and desperate.

I punched in the numbers. I heard a man say, "Hello."

And I said, *"Hi, I got this number from my mother. Uh, do you think you could maybe talk to me?"*

I heard him shuffling around in the bed. You could tell he was pulling some sheets around himself and sitting up. I heard a little radio in the background, and he snapped it off, and he became very present.

He said, "Yes, yes, yes. What's going on?"

**I hadn't told anybody, including myself, the truth** for a *long, long* time.

And I told him I wasn't feeling so good, and that I was scared, and that things had gotten pretty bad in my marriage.

Before long, I started telling him other truths, *like* I might have a drug problem.

And this man didn't judge me. He just sat with me and listened and had such a kindness and a gentleness. *"Tell me more ... Oh, that must hurt ... Oh."*

I'd made that call at two in the morning. And he stayed up with me the whole night, just talking, just listening, just being there **until the sun rose**.

**By then** I was feeling calm. The raw panic had passed. I was feeling "OK. I was feeling like, I can splash my face with water today, and I can probably do this day." I wouldn't have cared if the guy was a Hare Krishna or a Buddhist—it didn't matter to me what his faith was. I was very grateful to him, and so I said,

*“Hey, you know, I really appreciate you and what you’ve done for me tonight. Aren’t you supposed to be telling me to read some Bible verses or something? Because that’d be cool. I’ll do it, you know. It’s all right.”*

He laughed and said, “Well, I’m glad this was helpful to you.”

-- And we talked some more, and I brought it up again.

I said, *“No, really. You’re very, very good at this. I mean, you’ve seriously done a big thing for me. How long have you been a Christian counselor?”*

There’s a long pause. I hear him shifting. “Auburn, please don’t hang up,” he says. “I’ve been trying not to bring this up.”

“What?” I ask.

“You won’t hang up?”

“No.”

*“I’m so afraid to tell you this. But the number you called ...” He pauses again.*

*“You got the wrong number.”*

I didn’t hang up on him, but I never would get his name or call him back.

**But the next day** I felt this kind of joy, like I was shining.

I had gotten to see that there was this completely random love in the universe.

That it could be unconditional. And that some of it was for me.

I can’t tell you that I got my life totally together that day.

- But it became possible to get some help and get the hell out [of my life].
- And it also became possible as a teetotaling, semi-sane single parent *to raise up that precious baby boy* into a magnificent young scholar and athlete, who graduated from university in 2013 with honors.

This is what I know. In the deepest, blackest night of despair, if you can get just one pinhole of light ... all of grace rushes in.

“Bald terror” BY AUBURN SANDSTROM

Drug Addiction: The Phone Call that Saved This Addict's Life | Told on “The Moth.”

Included in: *All These Wonders: True Stories About Facing the Unknown*. Text can be found at <http://www.rd.com/true-stories/survival/drug-addiction-phone-call/> 2/4.

True for her – true for us!

**It’s an act of faith** that drives us to make the phone call -- make the prayer -and begin the conversation

**But it’s an act of sheer grace** that places the phone number in our hand in the first place, so that the call can be made

**It’s an act of Faith** that leads us -- to face-up-to our helplessness, our bad decisions, the truth about ourselves, and then to share it all with God.

**But it’s an act of sheer grace** that there’s an immense love within the universe – which may seem random, but is actually quite specific, and personal: that love is God, who carries your name and mine in his heart – and who is ready to listen and act on our behalf, and use his power to pull us out of hell, not just when we die, but right here and now to change us forever.

**2:1 You All were dead in trespasses and sins (bad news!)**

**2:4 But by Grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this is not your own doing -- it is the gift of God.**

*Make your choice today! May this be, or become, the Good News – this unearned gift from God – on which your life depends.*

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