

LIBERATED!

by Ray C. Stedman

In this first chapter of Ephesians we are trying to understand thoroughly the basic, foundational facts which underlie our faith and, therefore, underlie the experience of our lives. After all, what we are examining here is not mere theological doctrine; it is a revelation of things as they really are. It is the way God runs his universe. And to believe it and to act upon it is to return to reality, to become realistic once again.

We are working in this chapter with the great statement of Paul in which, in fourteen verses, he gathers up in one long sentence a number of fantastic truths centering around the work of God on our behalf. We looked together last time at the work of the Father, trying to understand something of what is meant by the words, "... he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" {Eph 1:4 RSV}, that almost incredible fact that somehow, by dint of God's nature as an eternal Being, he was able to see us long before the world ever came into being, and not merely as a possibility but as an actual person, to see us as we are, in our need, and to choose us to be holy and blameless, to be healed, by him. Then he "destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, ... to the praise of his glorious grace," {Eph 1:5-6 RSV}. He moved to initiate the activity which would reach us. He chose us to be his sons, decided to adopt us into his family and to make us partakers of his own nature. These are fantastic concepts!

As we come to Verse 7, we move in this great passage to the work of the Son. We see how the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity now moves actually to accomplish what the Father decided upon. The act of deciding was the Father's; the act of accomplishment is the Son's. The first stage of his action is given to us in Verses 7-8:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. {Eph 1:7-8 RSV}

A number of weeks ago, when I was working through this passage, I chose the title, *Under Construction*, because I was so impressed with the fact that all that is happening here is still going on. It is not something true only of our past; it is happening in our present. You can hear the sound of the sawing of boards and the pounding of nails. The construction activity is going on as God is building his church in the midst of the world today. You probably have seen that button given out at the Basic Youth Conflicts seminars which has the letters PBPGINTWMY on it. It is designed, of course, to evoke the question, "What does that mean?" The answer, obviously, is

PLEASE BE PATIENT, GOD IS NOT THROUGH WITH ME YET.

It is true that we are under construction. It's still going on, still happening.

But I have decided to change the title because of one Greek word which appears in this passage. It focuses so marvelously on the first stage of this that I'd like to use it. It is translated "redemption." We have redemption. But I don't want to use that term. It has become "theologized," which is another word for partially decayed! It has lost its meaning. I'd like to use a modern equivalent: we've been liberated. That's the idea. We've been *liberated*, set free. That is what the apostle is trying to bring home to us.

The picture presented by this word, and others like it in Scripture, is that of a slave market, a common sight in the Roman empire, where human beings were offered as chattel for sale to anyone who could pay the price. And Paul's idea is that here we were, bound as slaves in a great slave market. And Jesus came, paid a price, bought us, and restored us to usefulness. Anything in a slave market is of no use at all. Until a slave is purchased he is no good to anyone. And so this is the picture of a slave purchased and freed in order to be useful and fruitful to someone.

We still use the word redeem in that sense in connection with a pawn shop. I don't know how many of you have had the experience of having to pawn something. When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I used to spend my summers at Pasadena working in the Lincoln Avenue Presbyterian Church. We would drive out at the end of a school year to begin work there. As was always the case in those days we had very little cash. It took all our accumulated savings to buy the gasoline to make the trip. We always arrived absolutely flat broke. Usually we had spent the last of our money four or five hundred miles back and had gone without a couple of meals and slept in the car. There would be a week, or sometimes two, until my first check arrived. And so I always had to pawn something. The only thing of value I had, beside my wife, was my typewriter. So the first thing I did in Pasadena was to take my typewriter down, and pawn it. The pawnbroker and I had become good friends as the summers went by. We would live on that money until my first check came. Then I'd redeem the typewriter. Now, for that two-week period the typewriter was absolutely useless to anyone. No one could use it. I had no right to use it; the pawnbroker had no right to use it. He couldn't sell it to anyone else. It was in hock, in pawn. It was useless, absolutely useless. That is the picture that Paul gives here. When I bought the typewriter back, redeemed it, it was restored to usefulness.

I wonder if you ever think of yourself that way? In our natural human condition we are useless for whatever God has designed us for. There is no way by which we can achieve the sense of fulfillment that we long to have.

I know a lot of people who resist this idea. They say, "Look at non-Christians. You talk as though only Christians have any achievement, but look at the non-Christian world. Look at how skilled, talented, and able men are, at how many things they can do, and how significant it all is. Why do you talk like this?" Well, what Paul is saying here is that there is a considerable difference between achievement and fulfillment. Yes, you can achieve a lot of things, but they don't satisfy. There is no sense of usefulness; it all seems to be wasted. There is within you a kind of subtle, haunting reminder of the fact that this is all going to disappear some day, that you are contributing to that which is only going to blow up in the end and, in any enduring sense, it is a waste of time. That is what Paul is talking about.

I remember years ago teaching a home Bible class in Newport Beach. The host and hostess invited their neighbor from across the street. He was an outstanding engineer, a brilliant man, who prided himself upon his own accomplishment. He had told them on several occasions that he had no need of God, no need of religion in his life. But he consented to come this evening because, as he told them, he'd be the Devil's Advocate. He came in a little late -- the class had already started and I was already speaking -- and he announced himself. With a little obvious arrogance, he said, "I'm so-and-so from across the street, and I've come in to be the Devil's Advocate." I said, "Well, you're welcome. Curl your tail around the chair, and sit down. We'll be glad to have you." He spent most of the evening challenging all the statements that were made, trying to disprove them. But it was obvious that there was a hunger there nevertheless -- at least some curiosity.

I had a number of contacts with him afterward. At one point he even evinced enough interest to come up here to this area and spend time in some of our classes, and I talked with him individually at great length. But he always insisted that he didn't need God at all.

Just a few months ago I learned that he had discovered that he had cancer, and we were all praying for him, that God would use this to show him that his achievements, in the light of that which is enduring, were worthless. What he really needed and really wanted his money and his brilliance could never buy. We hoped that this would be accomplished, but just this last week I got word that he had committed suicide. A tragic end, but eloquent testimony to what Paul is trying to say to us here.

Achievement is not fulfillment; but when Christ comes in there is fulfillment. You see, in our natural humanity we are essentially useless for the purpose for which God ordained us and designed us. We are forlorn, abandoned, without practical value, though obviously with great potential, but unable to find fulfillment.

Now, into this slave pit, says Paul, Jesus came, and he struck off our fetters and set us free. He liberated us, and restored us to useful, fruitful, eternally significant living. That is what it means to be liberated.

In Texas this past week, we had with us a delightful young man who was the only one in the group who had a

long flowing beard and hair to his shoulders. He was a choice young man. He gave his testimony one evening and recounted how, just two years ago, following the pattern of so many youths up and down the West Coast, he had gotten into drugs. He was blowing his mind with heroin and LSD and other things, had tried to find satisfaction in sexual escapades of all types, and had sought some sense of significance in a commune living up in the mountains in back of San Bernardino. There, in the midst of his dreary, lonely, desperate life, somebody told him about Jesus. He told us that, in just a flash, it dawned upon him what Jesus had done. It was as though scales fell from his eyes, and immediately he was delivered, liberated. He never went back to drugs from that moment. He cleared up his sex life, and straightened out other areas. And the joy and the radiance with which he told this story gave ample evidence that the glory of this liberation was still with him, he was enjoying the fullness of it.

What is it that happened, specifically, when we were forgiven, when we were redeemed, liberated? Paul amplifies it for us in this verse. He says,

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, {Eph 1:7a RSV}

That is what happened. Our trespasses, our sins, were forgiven. The Greek word for trespasses is a word which means our missteps, our stumblings, our tragic, hurtful blunderings, in which we think we are doing something that will fulfill us, but it ends up wrong, devastating, deadening, and we wind up bitter and disillusioned. But those stumblings have been forgiven. The Greek word for forgiveness means *dismissed*. They have been set aside. They are no longer considered or taken into account, they are ignored.

Here Paul is putting his finger on the chains which bind us in our enslaved condition. It is our guilty awareness of these deliberate acts and choices that operates to make us hide from God, and also from each other -- and even from ourselves. It is our remembrance of these wrongful deeds that does it. We begin to withdraw because we don't feel we'll be accepted. We think we're not acceptable to God because of our evil deeds, and we begin to feel uncomfortable about ourselves. We can't feel comfortable in the presence of others unless we know that they have done the very same things we've done. And so life begins to become reclusive. We try to become self-sufficient. We don't want to be dependent upon anyone else. We become secretive, suspicious, independent, private, and thus also lonely and hurt, resentful, bitter and despairing. That is the pattern on which life is lived all around us, and which we know so well in our own experience.

But when Jesus comes into our lives he dismisses these trespasses. They are forgiven, set aside, and we hear him say to us, as he said to that unfortunate woman taken in the very act of adultery, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more," {cf, John 8:11}. Now how could he say it? On what ground could Jesus ever utter a sentence like that? How could he remain just and consistent with himself and yet set aside our guilt so completely? And the answer, Paul says, is "through his blood." That is how it happens. All through the Scriptures you find that there is no forgiveness from God apart from that shameful episode of the cross.

The cross is not a pleasant thing. Blood is not pleasant. It never is. It is sticky, messy, sickening. There are people who cannot stand the sight of blood. And this whole business of a bloody Savior is offensive to most people, because they do not understand why God insists upon blood before there is forgiveness. And yet there is no other way. Scripture is unanimous in its testimony -- "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins," {cf, Heb 9:22}. Why? Because it is the blood that underscores the reality of our guilt. Jesus died because we deserved to die. And we really do deserve to die; that's the whole point! We are not merely well-intentioned people accidentally stumbling along into trouble. We know that somewhere, somehow, we are involved in these deeds -- and deliberately so -- and thus we deserve the judgment of God. Our consciences tell us this; we can't escape them.

Jesus died because he took our place. That is what the Scripture announces. He was not merely a substitute. It is always difficult for us to understand how an innocent person can die for a guilty one, and set him free. But the Scriptures do not really teach that he was only a substitute, in that sense. There is an identity involved. What Scripture says is that he actually became us. "He who knew no sin, was made sin for us," {cf, 2 Cor 5:21}. And when he became what we are, God put him to death, because that is what we deserve. Scripture honestly faces right up to the fact of our guilt.

There is an idea abroad today that the gospel is considered good news because it tells us that men are not really to blame for their misdeeds. There is a school of behaviorism today which says that we can't help ourselves for what we did; we are the victims of our circumstances, or of our genetic makeup. Our genes are responsible, our pressures, our parents. It's not our fault. We had to do what we did. There was no way we could avoid it. But I want to say that if that is the case, then we are of all people most miserable. There is no escape from our guilt, because there is something deep within the human conscience which will not buy that proposition, will not settle for it. Our conscience continues to hunt us even though we try to repress it, and so we never can find the peace that we're looking for. We know we're guilty. We know that we've consented willingly to these pressures, that we didn't just give in because it was the most convenient thing to do; we wanted to do it. We wanted to go along, and we would have resisted attempts to stop us at the time we did so. And we know that is true. That is the reason there is no escape from a guilty conscience apart from the blood of Jesus, because it alone faces guilt squarely and does something about it.

Some time ago I ran across a quotation from Dorothy Sayers, who has done some very keen thinking in the area of theology, and I want to share this with you because it is very apropos. She says,

One of the really surprising things about the present bewilderment of humanity is that the Christian Church now finds herself called upon to proclaim the old and hated doctrine of sin as a gospel of cheer and encouragement. The final tendency of the modern philosophies, hailed in their day as a release from the burden of sinfulness, has been to bind man hard and fast in the chains of an iron determinism. The influence of heredity and environment, of glandular makeup and the control exercised by the unconscious, of economic necessity and the mechanics of biological development, have all been invoked to assure man that he is not responsible for his misfortune and therefore not to be held guilty. Evil has been represented as something imposed on us from without, not made by us from within. The dreadful conclusion follows inevitably that as he is not responsible for evil; he cannot alter it. Even though evolution and progress may offer some alleviation in the future there is no hope for you and me now. I well remember how an aunt of mine, brought up in an old-fashioned liberalism, protested angrily against having continuously to call herself a miserable sinner when reciting the Litany. Today, if we could really be persuaded that we are miserable sinners, that the trouble is not outside us but inside us, and that therefore, by the grace of God, we can do something to put it right, we should receive that message as the most helpful and heartening thing that can be imagined.

That is exactly what Paul is saying. The gospel emphatically does not say to us that we are not guilty, not to blame. What it says is that we are to blame. It faces us squarely with our guilt, our complicity, our willing cooperation with the forces that tempted us. It does not dodge it, it faces God's just sentence of deserved wrath, and says it is right, it is true. But then, it argues, the price is fully paid. Fully paid! God's integrity has not been violated. He is free now to love us to the utmost degree. His justice has been upheld in the blood of his Son.

No one can ever argue that God takes a light view of sin when he sees the cross of Jesus. In all that bloody, gory episode, there is marvelous testimony to the whole world that God will never, ever put up with evil. But the cross argues for us, that there the price has been paid on our behalf. He who took our place paid the full price, and therefore we are free. God fully accepts me. There is nothing ever to hinder him in the least degree. I can look my guilt in the face and acknowledge it, admit the whole stinking mess, and point to the cross, and say, "That has fully taken care of it, and therefore there is no use talking about it anymore. The cross has settled it. I'm no longer what I once was because of that." And God treats me in that way.

Paul calls that "the riches of his grace." You see, God did it all. I didn't add to it, I did nothing to deserve it, or merit it in any way. God did it all. That is the riches of his grace. But you notice that he uses an additional phrase which is most significant. He says,

... according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. {Eph 1:7b-8 RSV}

What does *lavished* mean? Well, when you lavish something upon someone you heap it on more and more. Lavished means repeated portions, again and again, and that is very important for us to realize. Paul is not talking here about the time he was forgiven, when he first became a Christian. In fact, the interesting thing is that the Scriptures never speak of us in that way. Redemption of believers in the New Testament is always a

present occurrence, and it is exceedingly important to know this. I find that many Christians think that the time their sins were forgiven was when they were converted, when, for the first time, they laid hold of the grace and the forgiveness that is in Jesus Christ. Most of us tend to think that then God wiped out the past, and gave us a clean slate, and that from now on it is up to us to keep it clean. He gave us a new start once. Now we are to struggle to keep things straight. I tell you that, if that is the case, I'm hopelessly lost, and so are you, because I haven't been able to keep it clean since then. Have you?

No, Scripture never talks in those terms, never speaks of our redemption in that way. There is an existential note here. This is something which is constantly being repeated, eternally present, it occurs again and again. Whenever guilt strikes me, whenever I discover that I have lied to myself, as I do, deceived myself, told myself at one level that I was doing the right thing, while, at another level, I was giving way to what I knew to be wrong, and loving it -- whenever that happens, I must acknowledge it, and face up to it again. That is so essential! And immediately that accomplishment of Christ is available, has already availed for me, and I step once again into a full sense of the acceptance of God my Father.

Now, God has never ceased accepting me at any time. His forgiveness was always present. It is my ability to receive it which hangs upon my willingness to face the facts, and acknowledge them. But the moment I do, I experience anew, afresh, again, the sense of liberation. And I tell you, I need forgiveness daily, and daily I have it. I experience daily the joy of being set free, restored to usefulness.

Do you know what that means? It means, first, that God accepts me. He accepts me just exactly the way I've been living and the way I am right now. There is no quibble about it, no second-class citizenship involved; he fully accepts me. I am his son, his beloved son in whom he is well pleased. That is who I am; that's my identity from now on. And because of that, I find I can accept myself.

There is the key. You see, the reason we feel haunted with guilt is that we have never accepted and forgiven ourselves. And if we haven't forgiven ourselves it is a sure sign that we have never really accepted God's forgiveness. But the moment I understand that God, who sees everything exactly the way it is, in utter, stark naked reality, says of me, "I am satisfied with you in the blood of Christ. You are accepted by me," then I have no right to say anything less about myself, and I can accept myself. And that means that I can also accept you. I can accept the fact that you, like me, are not perfect, and that you need forgiveness at times, and it becomes my privilege and joy to extend it to you, to say, "That's okay, I'm not going to hold it against you. I'm glad to forgive you because I've been forgiven."

There are some people who say "Well, this makes people exploit this gospel of grace. They tend to say, 'If that's the case then I'll go out and do anything I please, sin all I want, and God is going to forgive it.'" But Paul argues, in many of his letters, that if you can say that about the grace of God, then you've never experienced it!

If you really can say that you are just going to go out and exploit his grace, then you've never known what it means to be forgiven. Because if you truly believe, your reaction inevitably is, "What a tremendous thing that I'm free from this inner tension and self-hatred!"

There is no anguish, no agony, like guilt. There is nothing that haunts us so, nothing that makes us so peevish, and miserable, and restless, and upset with others as this terrible sense that we are inadequate people, that we are not worth anything. And to feel that way means that we have not accepted ourselves on God's terms. But if you once sense that you are forgiven, healed, whole in God's sight, that all of your sin has been set aside, and that now you can accept yourself, and regard yourself as a wholesome, adequate person, worth a great deal, made in the image of God, then you want to sing and rejoice and dance and shout to the heavens that at last you've been set free -- and you never want to go back and add to that load of guilt again.

When I was in Miami in January I attended a conference where a Methodist minister of Tampa, Florida, was speaking. At the close of his message he told us of an incident which had occurred the Sunday before, and I've never forgotten it. At the close of that service, which had been a wonderful Communion service, he asked a Young Life worker to come up and dismiss the service in prayer. He knew that this young man had discovered just the week before that he had terminal cancer. Well, he came forward he brought his guitar with him. He

stood on the steps of the platform, and said, "I'd like to give the benediction, but I want to sing it."

Before he sang he gave a brief word of testimony regarding his own life. He told of how he had been raised in the streets, had been kicked around, hadn't known any family life, had fallen early into drugs, had shot heroin for six years, and had destroyed most of the soundness of his body, and laid the foundation for the cancer that later came. He told of how he had sold his body to men to be used homosexually, had made his living that way, and of how miserable and wretched he was in that situation, trying desperately to find some sense of meaning and worth. Then someone told him about Jesus, and he told of how Jesus had freed him. He had become a Young Life worker in order to share the Word with high school kids. Then he said, "I want to sing this song now as the benediction." He struck a few chords on his guitar and very simply he began to sing that old Sunday school song:

I am so glad that our Father in heaven
Tells of His love in the Book He has given;
Wonderful things in the Bible I see
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.

Then he sang the other verses:

Though I forget Him and wander away,
Still He doth love me wherever I stray;
Back to His dear loving arms would I flee,
When I remember that Jesus loves me.

Oh, if there's only one song I can sing,
When in His beauty I see the great King,
This shall my song in eternity be:
"Oh, what a wonder that Jesus loves me!"

There wasn't a dry eye in the congregation when he finished, and there wasn't a dry eye in our conference when, at the close of it, Ted Smith slipped to the piano and softly began to play the notes of that song, and we sang it over to ourselves in our hearts. "Oh, what a wonder that Jesus loves me!" That is what gives us our sense of worth -- our sins are forgiven, not just in the past, but momentarily, day by day. Never, ever will our sins separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that these words may come home to our hearts with reality, and that we will understand that only in those areas of our life where we have been forgiven do we have any standing in your sight, that if there are areas of our life where we think we've made it, where we're already satisfying to you, where we've never needed to be forgiven, where we've been adequate, Lord, those are the very areas in which we stand condemned and ought to be ashamed. Forgive us our self-righteous spirits which oftentimes try to stand upon a phony righteousness, as though we were good in ourselves. Help us to take our place with the saints of all the ages and say these words, "We've been redeemed by Jesus' precious blood, and only that has paid an adequate price." We ask in his name, Amen.

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