

BUT GOD...

by Ray C. Stedman

The title of our study this morning consists of two little words: "But God...." These open the fourth verse of Ephesians 2, the chapter in which the Apostle Paul is setting forth the greatness of our salvation and is helping us to understand what has happened to us in Jesus Christ. Nothing is more important than that we grasp these great words:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, {Eph 2:4-6 RSV}

Those two words, "But God," represent a contrast. You remember that last week we looked together at the opening verses of this chapter to see what the condition of man is, as God sees him, as he actually is in life. In contrast to that gloomy picture the apostle now says, "But God, ..."

I don't think any of us has any idea of what life would be like if God suddenly ceased his redemptive processes among us. I am sure that within hours there would be mass suicides all over the earth, because every bit of glory would be removed from life, every bit of joy, every bit of gladness, all those moments that we delight in when the family gathers around and gives us a sense of security, of warmth and joy together. All this would be gone. For these blessings come from God's activity among men, from God at work redeeming, reaching out, seeking to arrest the attention of men and women and boys and girls all over the earth. If all that suddenly ceased, life would become incredibly dull and drab and dreary.

Now, life teaches us that there are times when God does temporarily withdraw his blessing from life and his goodness from us, and invariably life then turns impossible to live. I was in Newport Beach this week, and a woman there was telling me about her neighbor who came across the street one day to talk with her. He was in utter despair, and he sat there with his head in his hands and a cup of coffee steaming untouched in front of him. And he cried out in an agony of spirit, "God, but I'm bored!" That is the way life is for so many. Life is utterly dull, drab, lonely, and miserable.

Why is that? Well, the Apostle Paul tells us that this is the result of the condition into which we are born. And the only thing which alleviates it is the mercy and the grace of God. It would always be that way -- every moment of life would be that way -- were it not for God's goodness poured out upon us, to the just and the unjust alike, in his attempt to reach us and arrest us. So these words come through to us with great meaning: "But God, ..."

The apostle is very careful to inform us immediately of what it is that moves God to act, and he focuses on that: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, ..." That was the condition in which we were found. But God began to move. What moved him? The first thing, the apostle says, is his mercy.

I wonder if you understand what mercy is? And especially what the difference between mercy and grace is. These are terms which we bandy around frequently, especially in studying the New Testament. We use them all the time, but we often don't understand what they actually mean, and sometimes we don't distinguish between these important words.

A little boy in Sunday School was asked to tell the difference between kindness and loving-kindness, because Scripture uses both those words. He put it this way: "If I ask my mother for a slice of bread and butter and she gives it to me, that is kindness. But if she puts jam on it, that is loving-kindness!" That is great theological truth! That is a beautiful illustration of the difference between these terms.

And there is a difference between mercy and grace. It is true that God's grace reaches out to man also, but it does so for a different reason than his mercy does.

I wonder if you know the difference?

It is the guilt of man which draws forth the grace of God. When God looks at us and sees us as guilty -- as actually having made choices and done things which were deliberately wrong when we knew them to be wrong -- it calls forth his compassion, expressed in grace. Even though we deserve it, he still doesn't want to leave us in our guilt. So his grace is aroused and he reaches out to find a way to set aside the demands of law and to relieve us from the due punishment of our guilt and to set us free. And he has done that. It is the grace of God which has dealt with our guilt.

But it is our misery which calls forth his mercy. You parents know how this is. If you have a child who is suffering from a severe cold -- his throat is sore, his eyes are watering, his nose is running and all stuffed up so that he can hardly breathe, he is aching in every joint, and he is miserable and all he can do is throw his arms around your neck and cry -- what does that do to you as a parent? Why, it awakens your pity, and you reach out and try to relieve this condition in some way if you possibly can, because his misery has called forth your mercy. That is what Paul says has awakened the mercy of God -- the misery of man.

He has just detailed this for us in the verses which open this chapter. He tells us that, as a race, we are dead in a helpless, impotent condition. We are corrupt, decaying, and life is on a downward slant. He reminds us that we are molded by the world around us, we are gripped by this passion for conformity, and we find it very difficult to break away from the established trend. We don't want to be different, we are forced to conform in attitudes, in ways of reacting mentally, as well as in clothing and standard of living. And this holds us in bondage. We can't be the independent people we would like to be.

And further, you remember, we are controlled by Satan. There is a spirit which works in us, Paul says, which prompts us to disobey. Our first reaction to any demand almost invariably is one of belligerence. "Who gave you the right to tell me what to do? Why should I do this?" We come at life with a chip on our shoulder, and we are immediately defensive or belligerent. We learn to cover it over, we learn to smile and to be sweet, but inwardly we feel resentment at having to conform to someone else's desires. That is the spirit of disobedience which is constantly at work in humanity, making us strike out at one another and injure each other.

Finally, there is that whole realm of life which the apostle gathers up in the phrase "fulfilling the lusts of the flesh" {cf, Gal 5:16} -- these impulsive urges within us which lead us to desire certain things, or to hold certain attitudes, or to insist upon certain modes of action. We don't stop to reason them out. If we did we would see that they are wrong. But we rationalize them, we find excuses for them, and when our mind is able to invent a reason we act on it. The result, again, is that we injure each other and we destroy peace in a household, or in a family, or a company, or a nation. And this creates the heartache, the despair, the rejection, the discontent, the disillusionment, the sense of disenchantment, the boredom, the routine, the monotony, the frustration of life. That is why we spend so much of our time in this condition -- the tragic sense of life.

We are so aware of all this with regard to what others do to us, and so little aware of how we are doing the same thing to them. Isn't that amazing? Our image of ourselves is always so much better than what we actually are. It is so easy to forget the nasty little things we say, the sharp and caustic remarks we make, and the irritated attitudes we come to breakfast with. After awhile we forget about all of these, and as we look at ourselves we see what we love to call "beautiful people," with just a slight taint here or there that a good resolution would clear up. God doesn't see us that way. But we see ourselves that way and we can't understand, then, why life doesn't smooth out, why there is so much frustration and boredom in our experience, why we are always being so injured and hurt and cut.

But God sees all this realistically and he says, "That is what is making you miserable." This kind of condition is everywhere. It is shared with the rest of mankind. God sees the misery and heartache caused by it -- the tears, the disappointment, the crushing sense of frustration, of weakness, of inadequacy. He sees the misery, the abject misery of human life. And, more and more, this is becoming apparent to us as well, isn't it? But this

is what calls forth God's mercy. It awakens his love to reach out to us. He wants to do something to relieve the misery of man. That is what Paul says is happening.

God's mercy touches his love -- and love is active: "... out of the great love with which he loved us..." What the apostle has in mind here is the cross, and, behind it, the whole story of Jesus' coming to Earth. That is the sign of the love of God. How do we know that God loved us? Well, because "God so loved the world that he gave ..." {John 3:16a}. This is always the mark of love.

I think that husbands, for instance, have a great deal of difficulty in understanding and acting in response to the command of Scripture to love their wives: "Husbands, love your wives" {Eph 5:25, Col 3:19}, because they don't understand what love is. To most of us, love is a kind of feeling, an affectionate feeling, which we do have at times towards our wives, thank God, and with which we started the whole process of marriage. But it isn't always there. Nevertheless, husbands are told to love their wives. Yet if love is nothing but this feeling, this itch around the heart that you can't scratch, this uncertain attitude which is nice to have but that isn't always present, then it is impossible to obey that exhortation to love your wife.

But that isn't what love is. Love is a will, a choice that you make. Love is an active moving-out to meet the needs of someone else. That is why the Scriptures say, "If any man hunger, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him to drink" {cf, Rom 12:20}, because that is when you love him. You love somebody when you respond to his needs. That is the meaning of love. When a husband begins to meet his wife's needs -- to find out who she is, where she is in life, what she wants, and what she needs, and begins to work at supplying those needs -- that is when he begins to love his wife. And that is when a wife begins to love her husband.

And this is what God is talking about. Paul is saying, "God loved us and he did something about it. He came here." He is not a God of indifference or unconcern. He was touched with our misery and he came and he wept and he suffered. He became the poorest of the poor, he felt the pinch of poverty. He was rejected, he felt hurt, he was frightened, he felt all the trials which come into our lives. And when he had fully identified himself with us, he went out and, in the indescribable anguish and pain of the cross, for no reason in himself, he bore our sins. Of course, Paul doesn't mention that specifically at this point; it comes in later in the epistle. But it is the background, the necessary groundwork, for what follows here. It is gathered up in the great idea of the love of God, reaching out to us. And he did it, says the apostle, when there was nothing in us which could help him in the least degree, when we were dead in our trespasses. We have done nothing to break through this pattern of human misery.

I hope we all understand that very plainly. This is the biblical view of life, and it is accurate -- it fits history. This is the reason why you can go back through history and read about all the struggles of men in the past -- in the Middle Ages, at the time of our Lord, in the Golden Age of Greece, back in the Persian Empire, as far back in history as you can go -- and you will find that men and women then were struggling with exactly the same problems, and feeling the same hurts, and the same abject miseries, and were living in a dull, gray world governed by human hatred and fratricide and war, all exactly the same, exactly the same, as today.

We hear the prophets of our day who say that man has learned so much, that we have had an explosion of knowledge, that we now have technological possibilities which men never even dreamed of before, and that, with all this vast knowledge, we ought to be able to solve the problems of life much more readily. But the truth is that we have not learned one thing about relieving human misery and hurt. Our cities today are largely great pools of human misery, stirring with hatred and strife, and ready to break out in riot and revolution at a moment's notice. That is how much all the knowledge that humans have gathered through the centuries has meant in relieving, in actually breaking through this human condition.

When we were dead, when we were absolutely hopeless, then God did something. This is what the apostle wants us to see. God took action. God broke through. And what he accomplished did break the spell of evil, and began to set us free. All of this, as you know, becomes available to us when we believe in Jesus Christ.

Now the apostle moves to help us understand that. What happened when you believed? What did God do which has broken this pattern, and how does it work?

I don't hesitate to say that if we don't understand this clearly we will never be able to enter into the riches that are ours in Jesus Christ. We will always be groveling around, trying to live a good Christian life, struggling and discovering a few helpful things here and there, but watching others go on into freedom and liberty and joyfulness and beauty of character, while we ourselves never seem able to discover the secret. We must understand thoroughly what has happened to us.

There are three things that the apostle brings out:

1. First, Paul says, God "made us alive together with Christ," and, in parentheses, he reminds us, "(by grace you have been saved)" -- the grace of God, and not the activity of man. Man does not add a thing to this. There is not one thing which man adds to this work of redeeming broken human lives, not one thing. He never can. It is utterly by grace. So the first step is that we are made alive together with Christ.
2. Then comes the second: "raised up with him," and
3. The third: "made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Those are not merely theological phrases. They represent realities which have already happened, and which we need desperately to understand.

We will take only the first of them this morning. I'd like you to examine with me the phrase "made us alive together with Christ." That is only two words in the Greek language. One word gathers up "made us alive together with" -- all one word: he *enlivened* us, with Christ. There you have the central secret of the Christian life. We were made alive in Christ. That happened when you believed in Jesus.

I don't know what your feelings were like at that moment. Most people don't experience very much when they become Christians. It is usually a quiet sensation -- maybe a slight sense of peace came over you, perhaps a little relieving of your emotions. With some there is a sense of joy, but it usually is not very dramatic.

I have had the joy of leading scores of people to Christ, and almost always it is very, very quiet. And yet it is a tremendous thing which has happened! It is all the difference between death and life!

If we had a corpse here on this platform this morning, and it had been dead for four or five days, and if we had known this person in life, but we knew now that he was utterly dead, that he had lost all ability to think, to react, to communicate, to move, or to live in any sense whatsoever, and if we had the power to lay hands on him so that he came to life again here and now -- this would be heralded all over town within hours, wouldn't it? We would be astonished at what a miracle had happened.

And yet that is exactly what the apostle says occurs in the inner life of man when he passes from death to life, when he believes in Jesus Christ. That same dramatic, completely contrasting condition occurs within us. We are no longer dead when we believe. We are alive in Jesus Christ. A life has been imparted to us.

There are a great many similes in Scripture to help us understand some of these things:

One of them is the whole process of birth. Becoming a Christian is likened to being born again. But where does birth start? We know that it doesn't start with the actual entrance of the baby into the world. It starts with conception. And conception takes place in an act of love when the ovum and the sperm are joined together. But the mother doesn't know anything about it -- she doesn't feel that. Yet a remarkable thing has occurred within her body, something which she doesn't sense, but which, nevertheless, is going to change her life and perhaps the history of the entire world -- as many babies have changed the history of the world when they have grown up.

That is exactly the kind of thing which Paul brings to our attention here. When we are born again in Jesus Christ we receive life from him. We're made one spirit with him. We are no longer dead, no longer unresponsive to God. We are made alive in Jesus Christ.

Another thing which is helpful in understanding this is to realize that something has happened to our attitude. We simply are not the same person from that time on. And it begins to show almost immediately. I have learned, for instance, to start looking for a certain sign which is almost invariably manifest within moments after a person becomes a Christian -- their self-centeredness ends, momentarily at least, and they begin to think of someone else. I have seen this happen so many times at the moment someone has come to Christ and they I have had a minute or two to think of what has happened to them. So often they will say, "Oh, I wish you would tell this to my brother," or, "I wish you'd pray about my parents." Immediately their thoughts turn away from their own great experience to someone else with whom they want to share it. That is a mark that they have come alive in Jesus Christ. When we first started talking all they were concerned about was: "Me. What's happening to me? Where am I going? What's happening in my life?" But almost immediately after they receive Christ there comes this reaction which starts to reach out to someone else. That is passing from death unto life.

There is also a reaction immediately evident in their attitude toward God. Have you noticed that non-Christians are afraid of God? They don't want to come around church because they see people enjoying the presence of God there, and it makes them feel uneasy. That is perfectly all right -- they shouldn't be expected to come to church in order to find God. God reaches out to them where they are, through his people. But they are afraid of him. And this is why they are afraid of death. This is why non-Christians don't like even the thought of death. You watch them at a funeral. They are restless and uneasy and nervous, hoping to get the whole thing over as quickly as possible so that they can get back to the familiar surroundings of a bar, or their home, or someplace where they again can escape the thought of death. Why don't they like death? Because they know that it introduces them to the presence of God, and they are afraid of God. They are uneasy about the thought of God. They don't want God. They are hiding and running from him.

But when they become a Christian that changes immediately. Have you ever noticed it? Immediately. God is now their Father. They have a sense of belonging. And now the one person they want above all others is God, and they cry as did the Psalmist, "As the hart panteth after the water brook, so pants my soul after thee, oh God," {Psa 42:1 KJV}. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want," {Psa 23:1}. Immediately there is a hunger for God. That is passing from death to life. They are beginning to live as God intends men to live.

But the greatest thing of all, of course, is that great, central fact, the most important truth in all of Christianity, which is stated right here: "We are made alive together with Christ." Notice that Paul says "with Christ" three times:

1. "We are made alive together with Christ."
2. "We are raised up with him."
3. "We are made to sit with him."

The greatest fact of all is that we are joined to Jesus Christ. He has come to live in us. And more than just coming to live in us, he has joined himself to us, and we are one person with him.

That is the most important fact upon which to build all the rest of Christian faith and experience -- this great, tremendous statement that we are made alive with Jesus Christ, joined with him.

Do you remember how the Lord himself taught that? He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches," {John 15:5a RSV}. Can you tell where the branch ends and the vine starts? No. They are one plant, sharing one life together. So from here on our identity is no longer "in Adam," but it is "in Christ." We are no longer just ordinary human beings. We are new creations, begun again, linked with the life of Jesus Christ. And that is our identity from then on.

Remember that later in this letter Paul likens the church to a body of which Christ is the head. Have you examined your body lately? Have you noticed, for instance, that your fingers don't come off if you merely twist them a half-turn and pull? They are tied to the body. They share the life of the body. They are not attached by any mechanical process. They are an organic part of it. These figures are all held up before us to show us the intimate way we are united to Jesus Christ, to tell us that he is our life. And that is who we are,

from here on.

So never think of yourself in any other way, because the whole work of the enemy is to get you to disbelieve that, and to go back to thinking that you are just an ordinary individual, struggling on through life, trying to make it the best way you can, needing to mobilize all your human resources to try to get ahead of the other fellow and to achieve as much of the fulfillment of life as you can. And anytime you believe that, you go right back to acting as you once did -- back to the misery, back to the heartaches. You can escape that only when you come back again to this central truth -- we are alive in Jesus Christ!

There is one final thing to notice here. These verbs are all in the past tense. This is something which has happened, not something which is going to happen. It has already occurred when you believed in Jesus Christ. You don't have to work toward it. It is not something which great saints achieve after years of effort. It is something which is already true, and every Christian has this experience. We were made alive in Jesus Christ. We are not the same. We cannot be the same again, anymore. We cannot go back to living the way we once did. Even if we try, we won't be able to. This is why I sometimes say to people who get discouraged with their Christian life, "Well, quit then, go back, try not to be a Christian. See what will happen." They can't do it, and they know they can't, because they are new creatures, made alive in Jesus Christ. A new humanity has begun.

Next week we will go on together to discover the other two steps. But, in the meantime, never let yourself forget the great fact that you are changed, that you are a new creation, that you have begun a new relationship. There is no way you can erase it, and no way you can lose it. You are made alive together with Christ, and that is the basis of all your experience from here on.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we give thanks to you for this great truth. We pray, if any among us here haven't yet found it to be true, that even in the quietness of this moment they can experience this new life in Jesus Christ, that they will open up their hearts and say, "Lord Jesus, I need you, and you promised to come in, so come in, Lord," and that this great transaction will take place so that they will never be the same again. And we who have found it to be true, Lord, ask you to make plain what this means -- that this is who we are, and that we will never be able to handle life aright until we first know who we are. Help us to remember this, and impress it on our hearts and minds again and again that we have been made alive in Jesus Christ, called out of darkness into light, delivered from the power of Satan into the kingdom of God, and made new creatures in Jesus Christ. We thank you in his name, Amen.

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