

“It is by grace you have been saved” (Part One)

Reflection 23 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Ephesians is a great read, a book to be read closely and contemplatively, a book filled with cosmic wisdom – timeless, universal wisdom. Paul begins by saying some amazing things in chapter 1, especially in verse 10 that it is – and always has been – God’s intention to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ. That’s The Plan. That’s the real story on planet Earth – to tear down the walls of hostility (2:14). Now that’s a concept! To tear down the walls of hostility because most days that’s what we see all around us, political hostility in Washington, venomous hostility across the airwaves of America, hostility between Russia and the West, hostility between Israelis and Palestinians, hostility between ethnic groups, hostility toward gays, and hostility in our families as one spouse stubbornly will not forgive the other. And so the challenge is always, everywhere to tear down the walls of hostility.

To do that, however, there has to be an idea so powerful that this could happen. There has to be a way to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ. There has to be an idea that could make it work, that if everyone could agree on and grasp would go a long ways toward tearing down the walls of hostility.

This is what Paul gets to in Ephesians 2:1-10. Now note: He has just said at the end of chapter 1 that Christ Jesus was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms. Now in chapter 2 he says that in a very real sense the same thing happens to all believers. He says: We were dead in our sins, sins in which we used to live when we followed the ways of the world, when unknowingly we were under the influence of “the ruler of the kingdom of the air,” that is, Satan. Sin mastered us. Lust, ambition, greed, anger, fear killed us. Sin left us powerless, unable to say No to it. We were dying, dead. It impaired our thinking processes. We felt this insatiable lust for more. It increasingly preoccupied us until it took control of our schedule, our lifestyle, our relationships, our lives, so that we would take greater and greater risks to get back to it. We were dying, dead. It made us increasingly self-centered, dishonest with ourselves and with others. It turned toxic. It polluted us. It poisoned everyone and everything associated with us. Until it became the core, the defining concept, of our lives. And in the end, there’s no self left, no us left.

The author Iris Murdoch in her book *The Good Apprentice* (p. 463) describes the all-male crowd at an exotic dance club. She describes them as “an audience of clones. Furtive, shrunk into themselves, no gesture, no slightest twitch, proclaimed an individual. Blasphemously simulating the selfless contemplation of the mysteries of religion, they sat tensely still, while inside each head a small machine of secret repetitive fantasy noiselessly whirred.” Inside each head a small machine of secret repetitive fantasy killing us!

And there we were – all of us – gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature, following our lusts, our greed, our ambition, our fantasy, our fear. We were by nature objects of wrath (verse 3). If God had just left us to our own resources, we were dead, doomed, damned. Recall back in Romans 1:18ff. the form God’s wrath usually takes. God gave them over in the sinful desires of

their hearts. God gave them over to shameful lusts. God gave them over to a depraved mind. God just got out of their way, just let them be, let them do whatever they wanted, let them be whatever they chose to become. “Well, I got to be me.” “O.K.” And that’s the bad news.

But (now in verse 4 and this is the turning point) because of his great love for us, God made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions. Now look at when! We were still dead! God made us alive. God did it. It is by grace you have been saved. And (verse 6 now) God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms. What happened to Christ happens to us, has happened to us already. It’s past tense. It’s present reality. The same power that resurrected Jesus is at work reviving the spiritually dead and raising them to new heights of life in Christ and with Christ.

And then in verse 8 – the repetition: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” This is the idea that changes the world, that saves, redeems, heals, rescues, delivers, transforms the world. Now – with this idea and none other that I know of – it becomes possible to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ.

Now, as Paul says in Romans 5:21, grace reigns. It’s an end to moralizing, jockeying for status, self-righteousness, and cold, calculating, unforgiving hearts. It’s an end to conflict and division. It’s an end to arrogance when I’m right, and being fearful and controlling when I’m not so sure. It’s an end to all the things that alienate us from one another. They’re all over. Grace reigns.

In the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians, “All this is from God” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Atonement takes place in the very life and heart and experience of God. God was in Christ at the cross. God becomes the sin-offering. God offers himself to be ravaged by evil in its most horrific form and in a way that makes sense best on heart level turns evil back on itself. God absorbs the anger of the world. God demonstrates self-sacrificing love so that when we really see this, and are finally touched by it, we will stop our own self-centered ways. God comes to us in his goodness and kindness, in his purity and vulnerability, and lets the men of power and violence kill him. And by accepting suffering from everyone, Jews and Romans alike, rather than inflicting suffering on anyone, Jesus illuminates the loving heart of God who wants finally forgiveness for everyone and not vengeance.

More than that, or rather on a more personal level, Jesus takes our wrongness, the wrongness we each know we have – he dies for our sins – and pays it off. It is in this sense that he becomes our ransom. He took what was against us – that stood against us – and nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-15). He snatched the accusation from deep down in our souls and paid it off himself. And now at the cross we can see that at the heart of the universe there is not accusation but grace. Christ died for sins. He disarms the force of accusation at the heart of being human, and triumphs over it to bring us to God, to bring us all to God.

And he thereby unmask human violence. He exposes how we scapegoat people, how our violence is almost always displaced largely on those who are innocent. We have reason to feel wronged by someone; we almost invariably lash out at someone else. To expose all this, Jesus himself becomes the archetypal scapegoat. He himself would be the final “sacrifice for sin.” This

would be it! The last word on it! In a land on the edge of open revolt, he welcomed into his circle Roman centurions. There would be no scapegoats in his kingdom. None. Except for him. So now there's an end to self-centeredness, to inflicting suffering on others, to scapegoating, even to wallowing in our wrongness.

The dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week