

April 29, 2012
Ezekiel 37:1-14 / John 11:32- 48 / Ephesians 2:4-7
Made Alive By The Spirit of God

Last week we looked at the "bad news" of the universal human condition apart from Christ, or being made alive, or born again by God's grace. And what did we see? That we were Dead. (As I repeated 35 times according to one person!) "Dead in transgressions and sins."

And thus Alexander MaClaren points out, the apostle Paul looked upon the world around him, ***"many-colored, full of activity, full of intellectual stir, full of human emotions and affections and joys and sorrows... as if it were one great cemetery, and on every gravestone there was written the same inscription. They ALL died of the same disease -- 'Dead through Sin,' as the original [Greek] more properly means."***

And lest you write it off (as some have) as being the clouded opinion of one man who exaggerates human depravity and the effects of sin upon it / thus falsely represents our true human condition before God -- I would ask you to remember that this view of humanity is also the view that Jesus held.

"Except you eat of the flesh and drink of the blood of the Son of Man (and he means in the spiritual sense, of course) you have no life in you." / And to "have no life," as we all know, is to be dead. / Apart from the life He imparts to us, says Jesus, people, "have no life in them." They are "dead."

"I have come that you may have life," says Jesus. Why? Precisely because by nature we don't have life. We need Him in order to even have life.

"Whoever rejects the Son," says Jesus, "will not see life, for the wrath of God remains upon him." It's nearly identical to what Paul says here in v. 3. Christ came because the wrath that rests upon us by nature will continue to until or unless we come to Him by faith.

Thus it becomes very clear that we can't simply put it all off on Paul. For same view is espoused by David / Isaiah / Jeremiah / Ezekiel / the Psalmists / Peter / James and John -- and most importantly, Jesus Himself.

Yet it's not all doom and gloom. For off in the distance, behind the dark storm clouds of sin's bleak consequences / we see the brightest, most brilliant sunshine breaking through and revealing a redemption more exalted than anything we could imagine!

We go from our actual bleak and dreary condition in sin / to our present and future exalted position in Christ, where we are said not only to be raised to life, but "seated with Him in the heavenly realms" -- right now -- as we tread the dusty paths of this life and before we even get to heaven!

So, having summarized how our inherited / sin-stained / sin-producing / wrath-deserving nature has left all, "dead in their trespasses and sins" / let's now consider the unspeakably Good News that by God's great love and rich mercy and undeserved favor there is hope for the dead -- through the unspeakably powerful and precious grace of regeneration.

And here, as we look into our text, the **FIRST** thing it forces us to address is the question: "WHO Paul is referring to when he says, "us." "Because of His great love for US, God, who is rich in mercy, made US alive with Christ..." In fact, it is in resolving this question that we come to understand the other question that will inevitably arise when we realize further on that God chooses to raise some to life and not others (or not all).

So, who are the "US" who are the objects of this "great love" and "rich mercy" and "extraordinary display of His grace"? Paul already told us in chapter one. It's, "*the saints in Ephesus*" (1:1). It's the, "*faithful in Christ Jesus*" (1:1b). It's those, "*God chose before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in Him*" (1:4). It's those He, "*predestined in love to be adopted as sons*" (1:5).

It's the "we" of v. 11, who were, "chosen and predestined (in Christ) according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity to the purpose of His will."

You see, just because we moved on from chapter one, doesn't mean we can leave what it says behind as if it no longer matters. For anyone who studies Paul knows that He builds an argument like others build a house. The first

things that are laid down support everything else that's added afterward. He lays down the foundation, and then builds upon it.

Thus, verse 4 should be understood as saying: "But because of His great love for US (His chosen, elect, predestined ones) God, who is rich in mercy, made US (His elect) alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions..."
There's really no other way to interpret it.

Which brings us to the SECOND question we will inevitably be faced with by this passage: In light of God's obvious selectivity in choosing to raise some and not others -- how can God's love be called "great" and He Himself be called, "rich in mercy"?

If He chooses and predestines and in grace only moves to save some or raise some from their state of death in transgressions and sins and not others, how can we reconcile that with His LOVE being called GREAT, and He Himself being called, "RICH in mercy"?

And believe me when I tell you it's a question that has haunted and perplexed and stumped me ever since I came across this passage years ago. And not just this passage, but others similar to it like: Mt. 11:25-30 / Mt. 13:10-15 / John 3:1-8 / John 6:44 & 65 / Acts 13:48 / Acts 16:14 / Rm. 8, 9, 10 & 11 / and I Pt. 1:1-3.

And Listen: We aren't called to wrestle with it simply because one school of Christian theology says it's true. / We are forced to wrestle with it because it's the plain and clear and unavoidable declaration of Scripture itself -- whether we like it or not. And most, as you will quickly find, do not like it.

So let me give you an illustration that helps you understand why this passage causes problems for so many. When I first came to faith (at 23), I was enrolled in a class of Christian instruction designed for those who were like me, preparing to head to the mission field. And in our class on evangelism, the instructor gave this illustration. He did say that the "fall of man" was a horrible catastrophe -- like a ship running aground and sinking that left people in the water needing to be rescued.

And believers, he said (or the church), were like people in life-boats, rowing around and tossing out life-preservers to all those people floating on the surface of the water and struggling to survive and hoping to be rescued.

And those life-preservers represented the Gospel message. If the person saw the life-preserver thrown out to them and swam over and grabbed on to it, and hung on to it, the people in the boat would pull them in give them a helping hand to get up and over the side of the boat and as a result they would be saved.

But it was all up to them. Whether they chose to grab and hold onto the life-preserver was entirely up to them. Because they were alive, and could see it, and decide for themselves whether or not they would grab it. It all depended upon their choice.

But, you see, a few years later I studied this passage, and try as I might, I couldn't make it fit with that illustration. Why? Because in that illustration the people who needed to be saved were alive. Yet Paul clearly says that sinners in their pre-conversion state are not alive. They are "dead in transgressions and sins." They "have no life in them," said Jesus.

In fact, it's something Paul repeats again today in these verses: **"God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive when we were DEAD in transgressions -- it is by grace you are saved."** It wasn't our choice or our desires or our efforts to grab the life preserver that saved us. It was God -- who, because of His rich mercy and great love for us, moved in a mighty act of grace to make us alive before we had done anything. It was completely and entirely because GOD chose to raise us from the dead.

Wow. That changes everything, doesn't it? In fact, I can no longer use that illustration, without greatly diminishing and pushing into the shadows, the very thing this passage seeks to highlight and glorify and exalt and place in the spotlight -- "the incomparable riches of God's grace."

Thus, if I am to be true to Scripture, I must use this illustration instead. In the catastrophe of the fall the ship carrying humanity ran aground and sunk. And being so far from land, ALL the passengers drowned. Not one survived.

They all died in that horrible event / and their dead bodies floated to the bottom of the ocean -- as pale and lifeless as Jack in the newly re-released "Titanic" movie.

So what does God do in saving us? Paul states in v. 4: "Out of His great love for US (that is, His chosen, elect, predestined ones) God, who is rich in mercy, reaches down to the bottom of the ocean floor where all those bodies lay and out of the sheer, free, sovereign, unmerited, and undeserved favor of His incomparably rich grace toward us, chose to pick up our dead and lifeless body breathe the life of His Holy Spirit into our rigamortised corpse and make us alive with Christ."

THAT and THAT ALONE is why Paul can go on to say: **"It is by grace you have been saved."** Why? Because dead people can't do anything to save themselves! They are completely and entirely dependent upon God for everything! Since they are without any life in them, that means GOD must take the first step in making them alive (or giving them spiritual re-birth) or they will never be saved. They would remain forever dead.

Then THIRD, we come to the truth this passage also makes undeniably clear: That it is GOD who saves sinners and not sinners who save themselves. For what this passage teaches us is that we are passive in regeneration. It is not we who act; it is we who are acted upon by God while we lie there dead and lifeless and thus very much unable to do anything! In fact, what this passage assures us is that God's grace in regenerating us or making us alive is the instrumental cause of every-thing else that happens on our part thereafter!

Why? Because a dead person can't do anything! A dead person can't repent. A dead person can't believe. A dead person can't trust in Christ or come to Him in faith. A dead person can't see or hear or respond to the Gospel in faith - **- UNLESS**, of course, God first makes him alive!

That's obviously why Jesus could say in John 6:44: **"No one can come unto me unless the Father who sent me draws them."** "Can" is a word of ability and not permission. / So what Jesus is saying is that, *"No one has the ability to come to Me (that is, by faith) unless the Father who sent me draws them."*

It's a verse that can confuse people if they think we're alive and only slightly bothered by sin. But one that makes complete and total sense when you realize that we are ALL dead our in sins and thus unable to respond or come to Christ in faith / unless God first enables us by making us alive.

Which is precisely what Jesus says 11 verses later, when He tells us: "No one can come unto Me unless the Father who sent me ENABLES him (or as we could put it, MAKES HIM ABLE)."

So, my friends, it couldn't be any clearer. If you're a Christian / if you're a redeemed / believing / forgiven / justified / sealed / and heaven-bound saint / you owe it ALL (100%) to nothing other than the grace of God.

And Paul says it twice in these verses just to make sure we don't miss it: "*It is by grace you have been saved*" (vv. 5 & 8). If you're "in Christ" it's ONLY because, "God, out of His great love for YOU (a love not experienced or directed to all others) saw YOUR lifeless corpse lying on the bottom of the ocean floor, and out of His rich mercy, sovereignly chose YOU (out of all the other dead bodies lying there beside and around you) and raised you, by His rich mercy, from the dead."

And if that doesn't fill your heart with wonder / and spawn an unquenchable gratefulness toward God / and a joy that brings tears of unbelief to your eyes, then you haven't yet heard what Paul is saying. In fact, this message is so amazing -- its so unspeakably precious and unbelievable -- that sometimes we don't want to believe it. / We don't know how to handle its truth!

It can even make us uneasy or feel guilty: Like the young girl I read about not long ago who miraculously survived when everyone else around her died, and she felt guilty that she (for some inexplicable reason) was spared. That same thing can happen to us.

In fact, that's why I've wrestled with this so long and hard. Because I ask myself -- why me? Out of all those dead bodies why did He choose to pick up mine and raise me and breathe the life of His Holy Spirit into me and give me life and make me alive with Christ? Why, when so many of my unbelieving friends were (and still are) better people than I will ever be?

Why did He make ME to be a recipient of His grace, when I ran from Him for all those years / and defiantly shook my fist at Him / and so constantly chose sin over him for 23 long years! I still don't know, other than to say it was simply because -- for reasons still unknown to me -- He simply chose, out of His great love and rich mercy, in eternity past, to display His kindness to a dead and undeserving sinner like me.

And though some have tried to help me reconcile that quandary, by suggesting it was because God knew I would repent and believe, I would ask you not to suggest such an irrational and absurd thing! If we were alive in our transgressions and sins that might be true. But we weren't. We were dead. We had no life in us (I had no life in me). My soul was dead toward God and thus had no ability whatsoever to respond to Him.

Thus, although I do appreciate their attempts to help me resolve my dilemma, it is a bit ridiculous to suggest that God "chose me" or "saved me" on the basis of a decision HE KNEW I COULD NEVER MAKE unless He first -- by grace -- raised me from the dead!

Listen: God does not choose dead people on the basis of their ability to respond to Him! No, my friends! He does not go into the cemetery of this world and choose corpses in their coffins on the basis of their ability to respond to Him. Because they don't have any such ability!

Thus, whether we like it or not, we must live, and walk with Christ through-out this life -- content to rest in the knowledge -- that for reasons known only to Him, He inexplicably chose to make us the object of His great love. NOT because of anything done by us or foreseen in us, but in spite of everything in or done by us. / NOT because we were somehow worthy or deserving or better than others, but despite the fact that we were not!

That's what this truth does. It makes us realize that all are equally needy before God, because we are all equally dead! For there are no degrees of deadness! Dead is dead! No life means no life! In a cemetery, there aren't some corpses who are more alive or more righteous, or deserving or behave better than the others! Death is the ultimate equalizer!

And knowing that I, like all others, was dead, effectively kills the self-righteous thought that some corpses are more deserving of God's grace than others! Because I was dead, I can never say that my being raised to life was because I was somehow a little bit more alive than them in my deadness! Dead is dead, and no corpse is more deserving than another.

And what should knowing that we owe our salvation entirely to the "great love" and "rich mercy" and "incomparable riches of His grace toward us" do for us: Leave us standing in amazed awe, wonder-struck by the thought that we of all people (if we've experienced that resurrection of the soul) should ever have been chosen to be saved. Till the day I die I will never be able to thank Him enough.

Then **LAST**, let me try to show you how all this works. Last week I ended my message by saying that the knowledge of our dead condition in sin should spur us all the more to preach the Gospel -- by which God raises the dead. And I need to clarify that lest you hear me contradicting myself. And I want to do that by using the example of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead -- since it has always been a text in which people have seen his physical resurrection from the dead as an illustration of our spiritual resurrection from the dead.

In that passage, Lazarus has been in the tomb 4 days. And thus, to use the words of the great evangelist, George Whitefield, ***"Go nearer to him. Be not afraid. Smell him. Ah! How he stinketh... And what is this dead, bound, entombed, stinking carcass, but a faint representation of your poor soul in its natural state. For whether you believe it or not... your spirit is as literally dead to God, and as truly dead in trespasses and sins, as the body of Lazarus was in that cave... you are as unable to raise yourself out of your loathsome, dead state to a life of righteousness and true holiness, as ever Lazarus was to raise himself from the cave in which he lay for so long."***

And how was Lazarus raised? Did he hear Jesus calling to him and respond of his own free will? Do dead people have a free will?

Did his lifeless corpse ponder the call of Jesus to rise and decide he would come out of the tomb rather than stay dead? / Did his dead corpse hear Jesus

command and say: "Lord I believe I can do it!" / Did he say: "Let's see, this is all up to me whether I choose to rise or not."

Is that what happened? Of course not! Because dead people can't hear, ponder, mull things over, choose, or decide.

So, how then did it happen? I'll tell you: All of a sudden Lazarus found himself to be alive. Because along with the command of Jesus went the power to raise dead Lazarus! He didn't hear the command and decide if he wanted to obey it. / He didn't mull it over in his mind and choose to respond!

Rather (and much to his own surprise): He suddenly found himself to be alive -- not having the slightest idea of how it had happened -- but only knowing that it had! He'd been raised!

And finding himself to be alive (and surely wondering if it was even real) he walked out of that tomb -- not really believing it had actually happened until AFTER he stepped forth into the light of day, saw his family and friends and Jesus standing there, and then came to believe.

My friends, that's how this all fits together. In the Gospel God commands us to believe in Jesus. The phrase, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved," is in the imperative or command form. Yet, being "dead in transgressions and sins," we can't believe or respond or come to Christ in faith. As Jesus made clear in John 6:44 and 65 we don't have the ability to come to Him apart from God first giving us that ability.

So what does God do? With the command to believe, at the divinely determined time in the life of each of God's elect, God attaches a mighty power which gives life to that person's dead soul / looses them from their bond-age to sin / and by the influences of his blessed and mighty Spirit, causes them to be made alive with Christ.

That's why Paul can say: "It is by grace you have been saved." Because God is the one who "makes us alive." He does it! It was all Him! And He did it before we did anything! He took the initiative and made us alive!

You don't hear about it much anymore. Truth has fallen on hard times. But in years past it was called, "the effectual call of God." And it was called "the effectual call," because unlike the "general gospel call or invitation" which is given to all, when this call goes forth it goes forth to specific people / at a specifically determined time / and with the unthwartable power of the Holy Spirit.

And thus it always produces what it calls for: Life and faith and repentance and a soul that now desired to turn from sin and pursue holiness.

And so I close with the words of George Whitfield where after preaching on dead Lazarus being raised by the command of Christ he can say: ***"O that he would now rend the heavens, and come down amongst you! O that there may be a stirring among the dry bones this day! O that while I am speaking, and saying, "Dead sinners, come forth," a power, an Almighty power might accompany the word, and cause you to emerge into new life!"***

Believe, Christless soul! / Believe! / "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved!" / He commands you to believe! "Think it not a thing incredible, that God should raise their dead souls... I pray you, therefore, dead sinners, come forth; arise, and sup with Jesus... Oh that all who hear me this day may be then enabled to lift up their heads and rejoice, that the day of their complete redemption is indeed fully come, may Jesus Christ grant, for his infinite mercy's sake. Amen and Amen."