

May 6, 2012

II Cor. 5:16-21 / II Cor. 12:1-10 / Luke 9:1-6 / Ephesians 2:6-7
Seated With Christ in the Heavenly Realms

Last week we had a chance to gaze -- for the entire message -- at the amazing grace of God toward us. A grace that appeared all the more amazing (and should have left us somewhat dumbfounded) because we came to see it in light of how utterly undeserving and unworthy we were (and still are) to have been chosen by God to be the recipients of it.

In fact, that's why I spent so much time stressing how we were, "dead through (or as a result of) our transgressions and sins." Because "grace will never be seen for the amazing thing it is -- it will never be seen as "incomparably rich" -- until it is considered in light of our complete and utter unworthiness or sinfulness.

In fact, that's why I was so adamant to stress that GOD DID NOT CHOOSE US because of anything in us / done by us / or to be done by us in the future. Because the moment we say "He chose us BECAUSE..." we immediately diminish / and effectively obscure / and can even nullify completely "the incomparable riches of God's grace" which this passage goes to such great lengths to make the sole focus of gaze.

When you read the Ephesians, you must picture it as if you're seated in a theatre / where all the lights are off / and everything is so dark that you can't even see the outline of the person next to you. And then, as you sit there, a spotlight goes on, with its intensely narrow and bright beam focused on one and only one thing -- a huge, solid, towering rock carving of the phrase: "The Incomparable riches of God's grace."

God's intent is that everything else must remain hidden in the shadows, because THAT is ONE THING this book wants people to focus on. And to focus another light (even if less intense) on something as contrary to the message of grace as human merit or worthiness, would be tantamount to hiding completely the very thing Paul is trying so hard to emphasize -- God's unspeakably rich grace.

"Grace," as Paul R. VanGorder says in one of my favorite definitions, **"is God's unfathomable gift of EVERYTHING, for NOTHING, to those who don't deserve ANYTHING."** / Or as we could rightly amend it to bring it more in line with this passage: **"Grace is God's unfathomable gift of EVERYTHING, for NOTHING, to those who don't deserve ANYTHING but God's WRATH."**

Because in reality, it's not that we don't deserve anything, it's that because of our sin we don't anything but God's wrath.

And along the same lines, Peter Alwinson put it this way: **"Grace is doing good for someone when there is no compelling reason to do so and every reason not to."** It's so true. His words so capture the essence of what the Bible means when it uses the word "grace."

In fact, now you know why Paul had to start with the "bad news" about our being "dead in trespasses and sins," and "enslaved to Satan, and disobedience, and the cravings of our sinful nature." Because it's only in light of our sinfulness, which makes us completely unworthy of His favor, that the "incomparable riches of God's grace" displays itself in all its glorious splendor.

Grace is only astounds and amazes us when its seen in light of our sinfulness, depravity and unworthiness.

Which brings us to the text. And in light of what I've just said, the **FIRST** thing that needs to be pointed out is that every reason Paul gives for why God chose to raise us from our state of death and seat us with Christ in the heavenly realms is found in HIM and not US.

Which means if you are asking: "Why did God chose to save me, of all people?" you must look to something in Him / and not to anything in you! As people captive to human pride and the ego, we so want to think it's all about some virtue in us, while Paul goes to great lengths in this passage to assure us it all has to do with virtues or qualities in God. As John Stott rightly points out: "Paul assembles four words to express the origins of God's saving initiative: God's great love, God's rich mercy, God's incomparable grace, and God's kindness toward us..."

So when we ask Paul the question: "Why did God chose to save me, of all people?" what's his answer? "It's not because of any virtuous, worthy, merit-earning thing in you, done by you or foreseen in your future." "It's because God freely chose -- for reasons that accentuate the incomparable riches of His grace -- to love and be kind and show mercy and bestow His saving grace upon ones as undeserving as you and I.

That's what Paul leaves us to contemplate in this passage. The wonders of His grace! The fact that God chose to love us, simply because He chose to love us. / That He chose to show us mercy and kindness, simply because He chose to show us mercy and kindness. / And in doing so, display NOT the virtues of any sinner, but the incomparable riches of His own grace in saving an undeserving and unworthy sinner.

Hard as it is (and it is hard!) -- when we look for an answer to the question: "Why did God chose to save me? we must be content to confess / and rest in the fact that we have no idea -- other than the fact that out of His sheer unearnable grace He chose to make us an object of His mercy.

"We deserved nothing at God's hand," says Stott, "but judgment on account of our trespasses and sins." And thus, His act of saving us can attributed to nothing other than God's, "sheer mercy, love, grace and kindness." Period. And as hard as it is to stop there, we must do so, and never try to make it something in us. For to make it about something in us is to nullify grace and thus everything Paul teaches in this passage.

Then we come to the **SECOND** thing Paul tells us in this passage. That our being raised by grace from our death in sin to life with Christ, is only part of the good news! Because as he goes on to make clear, not only did God make us alive with Christ, He also, "raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms." It's all part of the New Testament truth concerning our "union with Christ," or "being joined to Christ," or being found, "in Him." The believer is so connected to Christ in the spiritual sense, through our union with Him, that what Christ experienced we also in the mystery of being joined to Jesus also experienced.

It's not just empty words or a quaint theological concept. It's a very powerful and experienced reality in the life of every true believer. An experience that is key to our sanctification -- to our faith and our attitudes toward sin and ourselves and how we view life and live life.

Thus Paul can say in a conviction that is about as strong as he can muster: "I have been crucified with Christ." That is, when Christ died, I died. And he means "I died to the same thing that killed Christ" -- sin!

"God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world is crucified to me and me to the world." Because of my union with Christ, says Paul, I was counted to have been in him when He was crucified and to have died to the things of this world. "I died and my life is hidden with Christ in God," says Paul.

That is: Worldly things no longer allure me. Sinful things have lost their appeal! They can no longer control my wants and enflame my desires and dictate my actions and determine my lifestyle because I died to them in Christ. Or as he could have said, "He made me to die to them, with Him, by not only joining me to Himself, but joining me to His death."

You see, Paul's life CANNOT be explained (as it so often is) by attributing to him some greater personal virtue with regard to resisting sin! He'd be appalled to hear people suggest that his life could be explained by the fact that he simply tried harder than everyone else or cranked up the power dial in regard to his own will-effort when it came to resisting temptation and serving Jesus and doing God's will.

Not at all! He himself testifies: "God forbid that I should glory in anything other than the cross. That is, God forbid that I should glory in me or any virtue in me or anything done by me, rather than the cross of Christ by which I was crucified to the world and the world was crucified to me!

It's NOT that Paul was "strong," it's that being joined to Jesus in His death had caused him (in his spirit) to die to sin and the law, thus causing those things to become weak and lose the power and sway they'd had over his life.

Paul would say: "I owe it all to Jesus, who by joining me to Himself, has joined me to His death." My life has no other explanation than that! "I was crucified with Christ, and thus I no longer live but Christ lives in me." He's the Source.

He's the reason. There is no other explanation but the greatness of His unmerited favor to me.

And he wants us to see that that same experience of union with Christ is the Source of our sanctification as well. "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of the world, why do you live as though you still belonged to it and obey its rules: "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle." (Col. 2:20-21) That is, if you understood that in the death of Christ you died to those things, they would lose their power over you also!

And then he goes on. It's not only our union with Him in His death, but our union with Him in His resurrection as well!

In fact, he says the same about Christ's ascension into heaven! "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ (and here he doesn't mean raised with Him in His resurrection, but raised with Him in His ascension to be seated with Him in the heavenly realms)... "Since you've been raised with Him, "set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set you minds on things above, and not things of the earth, for you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also appear with Him in glory."

Do you see what he's saying? By being joined to Christ we share in all the redemptive, life-giving, life-changing experiences of Jesus. We share in His life, death, resurrection, ascension and present enthronement in the heavenly places! That is what the Christian life is all about!

"These verbs," says Stott, "('made alive,' 'raised' and 'made to sit') refer to three successive historical events in the saving career of Jesus... the resurrection, the ascension and the exaltation [he uses the word "session"]. What excites our amazement, however, is that Paul is not writing about Christ, but about us!... God...quickened us and raised us and seated us with Christ [in the heavenly realms]... [That's] what

constitutes the distinctiveness of God's new [people]. Not just that they...worship Christ / not just that they assent to the dogma's of the church / not even that they live by certain moral standards. No, what makes them distinctive... is their union with Christ [by which] they actually share in His resurrection, ascension and exaltation."

And, here, few have ever explained the difference this makes, better, than James Stewart, when he compares modern-day Christianity's focus on "Jesus as our Example" with Paul's NT Christianity which focused on the vitality of our living, grace-filled spiritual union with Christ.

"It is perfectly true," he says, "that the noble ethic Jesus preached, and His own fulfillment of it in life and deed, have laid down the lines for all His friends to follow.... But what Paul's [focus on our union with Christ] does, is to remind us that the example of Christ is only a part, and not even the greatest part, of the redeeming Gospel. Were there no more than this, the contemplation of the perfect holiness of Jesus could only breed despair. For no shining example... can cleanse the conscience that has been defiled or break the octopus grip sin has upon the soul. The evangel of an ethical example is a devastating thing. It makes religion the most grievous of burdens. Perhaps this is the real reason why, even among professing Christians, there are so many strained faces and weary hearts and captive, unreleased spirits. They have listened to Jesus teaching; they have meditated upon Jesus character; and then they have risen up and tried to drive their own lives to follow the royal way. Yet disappointment upon disappointment has been the bitter result. The great example of Jesus [like the law] has been a dead-weight beating them down... It's so true. I embraced the view he criticizes early in my Christian walk and paid the harrowing price for doing so. Thinking I had to imitate Christ in His holiness to be pleasing or acceptable to God -- nearly drove me to the brink of utter despair. Which is why he goes on to say: "If... Christ (as ethical teacher and noble example) is all we have, we are left without a Redeemer... Yet ever since Isaiah," he says, "men have been aware that one of the vital distinctions between true and false religion, is that, whereas the latter is a dead burden for the soul to carry, the former is a living power to carry the soul... "Christ in me" means

Christ bearing me along from within. It means Christ is the motive-power that carries me on; Christ giving my whole life an incredible lift and turning every burden into wings!... This and this alone is the true Christian religion... To be 'in Christ,' to have Christ within... is the heart of Christianity... It is more: it is release and liberty and life with an endless song."

Cherish it my friends! For that's what assures us that Christianity not just another religion or a set of ethics and morals one chooses to adopt. It's not simply a human decision to follow Jesus (as opposed to Buddha or Allah) in the same way one picks their preferred foods at a buffet table. It's us responding to a miraculous and supernatural work of grace that God performs in your soul!

It's not us choosing, but us responding to being chosen! It's not the soul acting, but re-acting! It's us responding to the gracious initiative of God in making us alive and joining us to Jesus in His life, death, resurrection, ascension and present exaltation!

Which brings us to our **LAST** point -- what it means to be spiritually "raised with Christ" (through His ascension into heaven) and "seated with Him in the heavenly realms" (through His exaltation at God's right hand).

Because as we can see by looking at the apostle's life, it wasn't just empty, meaningless, quaint, spiritual language that had no bearing on how he actually lived his life. Rather, it was the source of sustaining power by which he lived his life!

And thus we must ask what it means (what it does to us) in our lives here and now. How is it that being "raised with Christ" in His ascension and "seated with Him in the heavenly realms" in His exaltation changes my life, sanctifies my soul, and gives me power for living?

First) It means that what man by all his efforts has never been able to achieve (that is, ascending into the presence of God / and standing before Him as not only acceptable, but as one who is reigning with Christ on the throne of God's rule) -- God has graciously given to us as a gift.

And once we accept that, what effect will it have upon us? It will cause us to see the need to stop striving for God's acceptance because we'll realize we already have it! / It will eradicate any concerns as to whether or not we'll go to heaven when we die -- since for everyone who is in Christ there's a sense in which their spirit has already been given a place there!

It was raised to heaven with Christ when HE ascended to heaven and thus Christ has a secured place there because He is there and we are "in Him"! Therefore we are to live as people who are guaranteed a spot in heaven, even while we continue to live out our lives here on earth!

But it should also convince me that my place there isn't secured by me! That's Paul's whole point! I get there because God, by His grace, has mercifully joined me to Christ and He's there! / Because I'm "in Him," His presence there, secures my place there!

What gains me God's acceptance and thus a place in heaven is NOT my attempts to become more godly / or more holy / or more Christ-like / or more devout / or any of that! It's the godliness and perfect holiness and righteous obedience and zealous devotion of Jesus Himself -- to which I am joined by being joined to Him!

Thus, the knowledge of my union with Christ -- who is my acceptance with God -- creates within me an inner sense of rest, and quietness of soul. It relaxes me and fills me with joy and does away with anxious worry or needless concern about my salvation.

Then **secondly**) Because my acceptance with God comes from my being joined to Jesus by faith or being found in Him and not from what I do or do not do it frees me up to take risks for God!

People who think their acceptance before God is entirely dependent upon what THEY do, always play it safe. They stay put on familiar ground and they never venture out of the safety net of the known. Because for them, to venture out into the unknown (and be adventurous for God) might mean losing His acceptance. Because you never know what might happen once you move beyond the safe routines or the familiar.

Thus, this truth is extremely liberating! Why could Paul venture out into new lands, with different cultures and a whole new set of obstacles and struggles and difficulties -- pagan places with unbelievable challenges to the faith (like Athens and Corinth and Rome) -- and try new methods of reaching people (though never a new message)? Because he knew He'd already been raised with Christ and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms! And that gave him a sense of security that freed him to be adventurous!

I've gone to conferences where men are encouraged to be "risk takers" and live adventurous lives for God -- and they leave emotionally pumped and motivated. But that's often as far as it goes, because in order to maintain that as my ongoing purpose and goal I need to be sure of my position in Christ.

In fact, I need to know that CHRIST HIMSELF is my surety or security. Someone needs to remind me of the gospel declaration in I Cor. 1:30 where Paul writes: "Christ has become for us wisdom from God -- that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

He doesn't simply make us righteous, He IS our righteousness! He doesn't simply make us holy, He IS our holiness! He doesn't simply redeem us, He IS our redemption! Simply knowing that liberates the soul!

Then last) there's also a sense in which being, "seated with Christ in the heavenly realms," means that we partake of all the benefits of Christ reign in the heavenly realms as we live out our life here on earth. That fact is as real and important and necessary to my Christian life as my being made alive in regeneration!

Yet you know what I've found? People place great emphasis on the one (on being born again or made alive with Christ) yet they rarely mention the other -- which assures us that by virtue of sharing in His exaltation and enthronement they share in Christ's kingly rule and miracle-working power and His authority over sin and evil and the demonic!

In fact, it's because of our union with Christ that Paul can call us ambassadors for Christ! An "ambassador" is one chosen by their government King or Emperor to go to a foreign country and represent them there, having all the

power and all the authority of their nation standing behind them and backing them up whenever they carry out their nations policies. (Not for personal stuff -- like getting houses and cars and money and lands and all those things -- but for those things pertaining to the interests of their nation.

And that's not only what we are, that's how we're supposed to see ourselves: As Christ's ambassadors -- who by virtue of being seated with Him in the heavenly realms and representing Him in this foreign land we call earth have all His power and authority and dominion over the forces of evil backing us up.

You see, if we really believe that (like Paul did) we'd be a little more bold and confident and assertive and joyfully expectant in our endeavors (just like Paul was). For as wise and educated and talented as Paul was -- those things don't explain his life and the success of his ministry -- this does.

The knowledge that he was already joined to Jesus and seated with Christ in the heavenly places and thus joined to the source of all power and authority in heaven and on earth gave him the strength and motivation and confidence to do all he did.

And if we believed it like Paul did, we'd be the same way. In fact, that's how I know we don't! Because if we did, it would literally change our lives and transform our soul and alter the way we do everything we do!

So I leave you with this one challenge: **Believe the Gospel.** That's it! This is simply the Gospel, and all I ask you to do today is to believe it and then go out and live like you really do!