

"The Gift of Grace"

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¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

"Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner... Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. ... This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate."

You know the story, but you may have forgotten that this is how it begins, that these are the words that Charles Dickens uses to open his classic tale A Christmas Carol. The story of Scrooge's miraculous salvation begins with death.

And so it is with our salvation in Christ. This message of Ephesians begins exactly the same way. "*You were dead*," the scripture says. "*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.*" If you do not understand this in the beginning, you won't fully grasp the wonderful things I am about to tell you.

The problem is that, most of the time, we don't really buy this. We might hear it symbolically or metaphorically. We might say to ourselves, "OK, I see how it is *kind of* like we were dead." But we certainly do not act like we really feel that way. In fact, as we look back on our past, we probably feel like we have living pretty well figured out. We know we are not perfect, but we aren't that bad. We do some good here and there. On the big balance sheet of good versus evil, we probably put ourselves on the plus side. We try our best to keep all of that under control. We are certainly not as bad as some of the people we see on the news. And life is not miserable. We have a pretty good time. We can enjoy a good meal, have a glass of good wine, bask in the sun, or take an invigorating hike to a waterfall or a beautiful overlook. Somebody may have even told us that we were "the life of the party."¹ In times like that, we certainly haven't felt like we were dead.

Thomas Lynch, who is a poet, an author, a scholar, and an undertaker, knows a fair amount about what it means to be dead. I first came to know about Lynch through a wonderful book he has written with preacher Tom Long called The Good Funeral. He was also featured in a PBS documentary on death and dying called "The Undertaking." One particular scene in that movie

¹ Scott Hoezee, "Ephesians 2:1-10," http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-4b-2/?type=lectionary_epistle.

brought home a point that seems obvious, but is still important to say, that is: dead people cannot do anything for themselves. The scene showed Lynch and his son making the final preparations for a funeral. It showed Lynch buttoning the collar of a deceased man, tying his tie, respectfully sliding a sport coat under the dead man's neck, tucking it down underneath his body, and then placing each arm into a sleeve. Later, the two men would gently and reverently lift the body up and lay it mildly down into the casket. The dead man, being dead, could do absolutely nothing for himself.

That is what Ephesians is getting at when it comes to faith. We are fooling ourselves if we think that, when it comes to our salvation, we are doing anything for ourselves. We are fooling ourselves when we think we've got it under control by doing a little here and there. Before we profess new life in Jesus, before we lay claim to a personal share of his resurrection, we must acknowledge first that in our sin we have been dead... not sleeping like a bulb in the ground, waiting for spring to sprout and return... not slipping away on a surgical table only to be zapped back to life by a defibrillator... not tipping our days away on a spiritual see saw trying to tip the scales in our favor... but dead as a doornail in our sin. Completely boxed in and buried for good. There can be no doubt whatsoever about that. This must be distinctly understood, the writer of Ephesians says, or nothing wonderful can come of the gospel story he wants to relate. We fool ourselves when we think that, before we met Christ, we were not really dead.

But we can also fool ourselves in another way, and the writer of Ephesians has something to say about this, too. We can also fool ourselves by thinking that, even with Christ, we are not really alive.

Years ago there was a man who worked his whole life as the handyman of a fancy hotel in Manhattan.² He had never married, so fixing problems at any hour of the day or night was really no trouble. When something broke, he always came to the rescue with a wrench in his hand and a smile on his face. The job never paid very well, so he made barely enough to get by, even with the free room the hotel gave to him down in the basement. As he neared retirement, he had very little in the way of savings.

As guests in the hotel came and went, he would often overhear their conversations about trips and vacations they had taken. Of all the places he heard about, he was most taken with the Caribbean. If an employee of the hotel got to know him well enough, if he felt comfortable with that person, they would likely hear him share the dream of someday taking a cruise to those peaceful islands with their crystal blue waters. He could imagine the warmth of the sun on his face, the smell of the ocean breeze and boiling shrimp, and the feel of fine white sand between his toes. For someone who spent most of his days in dark, damp places in the city, it all sounded like heaven.

On the 50th anniversary with the hotel, the managers and employees got together to give him a special gift. They took up a collection and bought him a ticket on a luxury cruise line. The ship would leave from New York and travel through the western Caribbean for two whole weeks. With great anticipation, the man went out and bought himself a suitcase. He packed a few changes of clothes. He didn't have that much to choose from anyway, and he figured that he could find some way to wash what he had while he was on board. The rest of the space in the suitcase he filled with inexpensive cheese and crackers. That's all he could afford.

On board the ship, when meal times came, the man watched as all the other passengers filed into the huge, beautifully appointed dining room. The man would then retire to his stateroom to eat his humble meal of cheese and crackers. He knew he could not afford the food in the dining room. As he walked back down to his cabin, he could still smell the wonderful scents emanating from the

² This story comes from a 1981 sermon, "Don't Save the Cream," preached by Dr. Joseph Mullin at First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro, NC.

kitchens. After the meals, he would see the happy faces of the passengers rubbing their full bellies. He heard the descriptions of the sumptuous dinner they had just enjoyed. Sometimes he'd even lie in his bunk, as the ship gently rocked him to sleep, dreaming of the delicious food the other guests had described.

Finally, the last night of the cruise came. The ship would be docking back in New York the next morning. As he looked into his suitcase, and saw the one remaining packet of cheese and crackers sitting there, the man decided that he might as well splurge. He would get one, good meal in the dining room. He walked timidly through the big gold doors and gave his name to the steward, who showed him to his assigned seat. He spent a few minutes just staring at the fancy place setting, the crystal stemware and the perfectly pressed tablecloth. Eventually, he got up the courage to pick up the menu. Right about that time, the waiter arrived.

"What can I get you this evening, sir?"

The man didn't know what to say. He looked up with embarrassment. "I'm not sure," he said. "This menu doesn't have any prices on it. I don't have a lot of money, so I need to know how much everything costs before I decide."

"But sir," the waiter answered, "don't you know that all your meals on board the ship are included in the price of your ticket? Everything on that menu has already been paid for!"

Even in Christ, even as we live under the gift of grace that Christ has freely given us, many of us still feel like it is up to us to steer our spiritual ship. Too often, we look at the things we do — coming to church, giving to the poor, telling the truth, putting time in to help others or do our share — as burdens to bear or boxes to check off to make sure we stay on the good side of the ledger. When we live this way, we are failing to recognize that God has already done it all. Our ticket has been paid and punched, once and for all, and it opens to us the free gift of all good things... the full banquet of life in God... the joyful plenty of the One who not only brings us the basics of life, but says "I came that you may have life, and have it **abundantly**."³

Now, please hear me clearly on this point. This passage is **not** saying that what we do does not matter. What we do does matter. It matters a lot. What this passage is saying is that we do not make it into the banquet hall by what we save or what we spend or what we do or what we do not do. We are in. The banquet is already ours. So we do not have to live like we are scrounging just enough to eke out a meagre existence on a diet of cheese and crackers. In Christ, we have been given "*the immeasurable riches of [God's] grace*. It is the joy of that blessing that moves us to respond with joyful gratitude in worship and service to others in God's name. The good works are important, but they are neither buying our ticket nor steering the ship. "*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*"

The truth of the gospel is this. We are fooling ourselves if we think that, apart from Christ, we were not fully dead. And we are also fooling ourselves if we fear that, even in Christ, we are not fully alive. By grace we have been saved! So why are we still eating stale cheese and crackers? Let us instead embrace in full this amazing gift that we have been given, and take our place in the banquet hall of Jesus.

Amen.

³ John 10:10 (emphasis added).