

Free, Free. Free, Free, Free

Eph. 2:1-10

5/24/20

After a long illness, a woman died and arrived at the gates of heaven. As she was waiting for St. Peter, she peeked through the gates and saw a beautiful banquet table with all kinds of wonderful food. Around the table, she was excited to see her parents, her friends and others she had loved during her life on earth. When they saw her, they shouted, "Great to see you! We've been waiting for you!"

When St. Peter showed up, the woman asked, "How do I get in?"

Peter replied, "You have to spell a word."

"Which word," the woman asked.

"Grace," said St. Peter.

"G-R-A-C-E," replied the woman, and was promptly admitted to heaven.

A few years later, she saw St. Peter again who explained that he needed to run an errand and asked the woman if she would watch the gate for him. She agreed. While she was watching the gate, she was surprised to see her husband approaching. "How have you been?" she asked.

"Oh. I've been doing pretty well since you died," he responded. "I married the beautiful young nurse who took care of you while you were ill. And then I won the lottery. I sold our old house and bought a beautiful

mansion. My new wife and I traveled all over the world. We were on vacation, and I was water skiing today. I fell, hit my head on rock, and here I am. What do I have to do to get into this place?

“You have to spell a word,” she replied.

“Which word?”

“Czechoslovakia,” she answered.

As we continue Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we come to grace. But that’s not where Paul begins. Listen as I read from Eph. 2, beginning in verse 1. *You were dead through the trespasses and sins<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> All 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.* (Eph. 2:1-3)

I call this section, “Dead in the Water in Sin!” Paul begins by saying “You were dead through the trespasses and sins.” You might wonder who the “you” refers to. Paul differentiates between “you” and “us” throughout the letter, and when he does, “you” refers to the Gentile Christians at Ephesus. As such, he says the Gentiles (that term includes us) were dead in our sins. That refers to the spiritual death that sin brings to us, cutting off our relationship with God and other people. And, we’re helpless to do

anything about it. He goes to argue that they are shot through with sin, just like the rest of the world and subject to evil spiritual powers.

Then he switches pronouns, “*All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh...*” he says. (Eph. 2:3) Now he includes the Jewish people, God’s chosen people, lumping them together with the Gentiles. This means that every one of us is dead in the water in our sins. By the way, when he describes our sin as the “passions of our flesh,” he doesn’t just have sexual sins in mind. In the book of Galatians, he writes, “<sup>19</sup>*Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,* <sup>20</sup>*idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,* <sup>21</sup>*envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* (Gal. 5:19-21) I’m guessing each of us can see ourselves in that list somewhere! And, all those sins work to thwart God’s work here on earth, causing pain to ourselves and others. Because of that, we deserve God’s judgment. That’s the bad news. But fortunately, the passage doesn’t stop here!

<sup>4</sup>*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us* <sup>5</sup>*even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—* <sup>6</sup>*and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,* <sup>7</sup>*so*

*that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (Eph. 2:4-7)*

Everything now changes with those words, “But God...” We were dead in sin, but God...made us alive together with Christ! That’s the core of the sentence with all the modifiers removed. And God does this out of his mercy and love for us, for it is God’s very nature to be merciful and loving!

The last three verses in the passage sum everything up. They have been called Paul’s best summary of the gospel. I remember memorizing them as a child in Sunday School! <sup>8</sup>*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—* <sup>9</sup>*not the result of works, so that no one may boast.* <sup>10</sup>*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Eph. 2:8-10)*

Let’s look at a couple of the key words in these verses together. The first, of course, is “grace.” What is grace? Pastor and author, John Ortberg, tells of a gathering he went to on the weekend of his child’s graduation from Azusa Pacific University in California. Several of the graduates, along with graduates from the graduating class of 50 years before, came together for a special meeting. They honored three of the

new graduates because they were headed to India in order to serve the poorest of the poor for the next two years. Everyone was impressed.

Then John Wallace, the college president, turned to these students and said, "I have some good news for you. There's somebody you do not know- an anonymous donor- who is so moved by what you're doing that he has given a gift to this university in your name, on your behalf." He turned to the first student and said, "Your student loan of \$105,000 is forgiven!" The kid immediately begins to cry. Dr. Wallace turned to the second student and said, "You're forgiven your debt of \$70,000!" More tears. Then he turns to the third student and says, "Your loan debt of \$130,000 is forgiven!"

The students had no idea this was coming. They were ambushed by grace! Someone they didn't even know had chosen to give them a great gift, just because they wanted to do it. That's grace. And it's a lot like God's grace. It's given freely to us by God, and in our case, we don't even deserve it! God forgave us while we were "dead in our sins," according to Paul. And whatever good deeds we may have done have nothing to do with it. Otherwise, it wouldn't be grace, would it? It would be earned! But, we have been saved by grace! That is wonderful news.

Let's look at one more word. We've been saved by grace through faith. A number of years ago, H&R Block, the tax preparers, offered a

promotion in which one of their walk-in customers could win a million dollars! Glen and Gloria Sims of Sewell, NJ won the drawing, but they refused to believe it when the H&R Block representative called to inform them! After several attempts to contact the Sims by mail and phone, the Sims still thought it was a scam! Some weeks later, H&R Block called one last time to let them know that the deadline was approaching for them to accept their prize, and that the story of their refusal to accept the prize would appear on NBC's "Today" show.

At that point, Mr. Sims did some further investigation. A few days later, he appeared on the "Today" show to claim his prize, looking a little embarrassed! H&R Block had a wonderful gift for this couple, but they needed to believe it was real and accept it before it would do them any good.

That's like the role of faith in God's gracious gift to us. Although it's "free, free, free, free, free," we have to believe in God's offer and stop trusting in our own good deeds to impress God and win his favor. Paul makes it pretty clear that that just won't work! In fact, he specifically says that it's "*not the result of works so that no one can boast!*" It's grace, through faith!

Let's wrap things up with the last verse. <sup>10</sup>*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared*

*beforehand to be our way of life.*" (Eph. 2:10) Here, we see that although our good works can't earn us God's favor and grace, that God still wants us to be partners with his work here on earth, as we live a new way of life. Our good deeds are a result of God's grace, not the cause of it. They flow out of a new relationship with God.

In the wonderful film, "A Christmas Story," Ralph gets into a fight with the local bully on his way home from school after a particularly trying day. He surrenders to his rage and pummels the bully while unleashing a stream of profanities, which his mother overhears. She sends him to his room to wait the arrival of his father. Ralphie is terrified of what is coming. And, he's not alone! His mom finds his younger brother, Randy, hiding under the sink, crying. "What's the matter?" she asks. "Daddy's gonna kill Ralphie!" he wails.

Ralphie hears the car pull up and is overwhelmed with fear and shame. Over dinner, his dad asks, "Anything happen today?" Ralphie realizes his life is about to end. But his mom responds, "Nothing much. Ralphie had a fight."

Dad slowly lowers the newspaper and looks sternly at Ralphie. "A fight? What kind of fight?"

Mom replies, "Oh, you know how boys are. I gave him a talking to. Oh, I see the Bears are playing the Packers Sunday."

Ralphie received a wonderful gift of grace didn't he? He had done wrong, but was forgiven, and spared punishment. And Ralphie knew it! He reflected, "I slowly realized that I was not about to be destroyed. From then on, things were different between me and my mother."

Grace will do that! Grace opens a whole new relationship with God, one based on trust and love and not fear! And in gratitude for God's grace, we joyfully begin to do his work in our families, our schools, our places of work, and our communities. Things are different between us and God.