

## Sermon – 20/04/2008 am

### God's Great Love

Study Text: Ephesians 2:4–5

Chapter two of Ephesians begins with the words *and you* (2:1). Addressing both Jew and Gentile Paul declared that we were all born dead in our sin, walked in darkness, and were under the power of the devil. The picture he paints of the human condition is entirely bleak and utterly tragic. Paul was not concerned with flattery or political correctness. He was concerned with the truth.

Few people are prepared to face the truth about their sin and total depravity. They object to being called sinners and children of the devil. They live the lie, telling themselves that they are 'not so bad' and that they can get better by their own efforts. Man's greatest need is to know what his greatest need is! Paul makes it abundantly clear what is our greatest need in this great chapter. We need to be saved. But how? Who will save us?

### But God

What comforting words these are to the sinner – are they comforting to you? But God! Do these words touch your heart? Think for a moment where you would be without God – dead, in darkness and ruled by the devil. You would still be the object of God's wrath. Notice the 'but' - *But God!* If it was just *God* Paul might go on to say God is now going to destroy you? You have rebelled, you are an enemy of God and he will judge you and throw you into hell.

'But' is a small word, but it is powerful. It has the effect of cancelling what has just previously been said. How do you understand someone who says 'I will help you but' or 'I love you but'? Paul tells us we were dead in our trespasses and sins, and now he says *but*, thereby cancelling the effect of what he just said. Moreover, it is not just *but* – it is *but God*. A great light suddenly shines into the darkness. 'Without God and without hope' is going to suddenly change to 'with God and with hope'.

When Daniel was thrown into the lion's den, king Darius could not sleep, nor could he eat. He felt so guilty for what he had done to Daniel. His hands were tied as it were – not Daniels! He could do nothing to settle his troubled conscience. He might have taken to drink for comfort, but as Proverbs says *drink at last bites like a snake* (Proverbs 23:32). He might have lashed out at those who tricked him, but he spent the night alone, possibly in prayer. At first light he raced to the lion's den, desperately hoping for a '*but God*'. Calling to Daniel he heard the words *My God sent his angel to save me* (Daniel 6:22).

At first light on another morning Mary ran to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. In her grief she came to anoint his body, for that was all she could do. But God! God had raised Jesus from the dead. Peter told the Jews *you crucified him and put him to death but God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death* (Acts 2:24). So it is that we are raised with Christ, we are made alive together with Christ and raised with him (2:5, 6).

This passage and the whole Bible declares two fundamental facts. These same facts are also portrayed by the world, if we would but stop for a moment and take a careful look around us

and at our own lives. The first fact is that we do wrong, and we lack self-control. The Bible puts it more clearly telling us we are sinners born in sin, and are under the control of the devil. The second fact is that we cannot help ourselves even if we want to. We do not have within ourselves the power to change. We keep doing wrong things like telling lies, cheating, getting angry, and grumbling and on and on we can go. We need help. But who will help?

There is no shortage of those offering help. There are those who tell you to find some inner strength, those who tell you to follow them, those who tell you science will solve all your problems, those who can't wait and turn to alcohol or drugs, and then there are those who point you to the stars. There are those who point you to some god but which god.

The religious market place is full gods. Paul pointed the people of Athens to the God they did not know but the God who made this world, the God who created us in his image and the God who will judge all people. He is the only God who can help us. He sent his own Son Jesus Christ into this world for this very purpose.

## Great Love

Only the God and Father of Jesus Christ has the power to save us from the world, the flesh and the devil. In his wrath against sin God gave us up to these other powers. Only God can remove his wrath from us. But why? Why would he choose to do this when we rebel against him? Do not think for a moment that God has any need of your beautiful body, clever mind, or your deep love. Do not think for a moment that he is so impressed by your good deeds or sincere worship that he is moved to help you.

*But God who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us (2:4). In Romans 5:8 Paul writes God demonstrates his own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. John writes in I John 4:9 In this the love of God was manifested to us, that God sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. And of course the great gospel verse John 3:16 also tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*

God in his great love sent his Son Jesus into this world that we might live and not remain dead in our sins. Why is it great love? Firstly, because it was God's plan and purpose from the very beginning. Even though Adam sinned and was justly condemned to death, God did not totally abandon the human race. He declared that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15).

God's love is covenant love. It is love that never fails. God remembered Noah when he judged the world and saved him through the flood. God remembered Israel when they were in slavery. In making a covenant with his chosen people he revealed himself to Moses as a merciful and gracious God (Exodus 34:6). God has remembered you in your sin and misery.

Secondly, his love is great because he gave his only begotten Son to die for us. *Greater love has no man than that he lays down his life for his friends (John 15:13)*. Great love is not just words but action. Great love is giving the most precious thing you have. God gave his only begotten Son, the second person of the Trinity.

Thirdly, his love is great because we in no way deserved his love. Great love is shown towards those who least deserve it. Great love is love shown to the unlovely. Jesus said love

your enemies for if you love those who love you what reward have you (Matthew 5:46). Jesus practiced what he preached.

## **Mercy and Grace**

God is *rich in mercy*. God's love is unique for its greatness and its quality. It is the benchmark, if you like, for love. *This is how we know what love, is Jesus laid down his life for us* (I John 3:16). God revealed himself to Moses as rich in mercy and grace as we have seen. Mercy and grace are particular characteristics of God's love that we must now look into. Mercy is 'the outward manifestation of pity; it assumes need on the part of him who receives it and resources adequate to meet the need on the part of the one who shows it'. Jesus was moved by compassion when he saw the people in their helpless and hopeless condition. He healed the sick and cast out demons; he also preached the kingdom of God (Matthew 9:35f).

Years ago when I driving in the country I saw a ragged looking man on the side of the road. I stopped to offer him a lift. I thought that since I was going that way and had a seat in my car I could help him out. I had the resources to help him. This was no great act of love since it was not going to cost me anything – so I thought. He got into the front seat and we set off. Then the smell hit me. He had not washed for days and wreaked something horrible. I opened every vent I could find but still the smell came – and it stayed for the next four hours as I drove to the city!

What I thought was an act of mercy became an act of grace. My pity for him had to become grace. Grace is love shown towards those who are objectionable – stinking if you like. We can bring all our good works to God but they are like filthy, smelly rags before him. Paul will come to the wonderful grace of God shortly but even here has to make mention of grace. We find it in brackets – *by grace are you saved* (2:5).

Turn briefly to see the wonderful grace of Jesus even when he was on the Cross (Luke 23:34). *Father forgive them they do not know what they do* he said as he hung there in agony. He said this of those who had nailed him to the Cross. Peter was not guilty of this terrible deed but he was guilty of denying Jesus his Lord. Jesus prayed for him and in his grace restored Peter to himself. Peter could not take back those terrible lies he uttered, but Jesus forgave and restored him.

We could go on and look at the thief on his cross beside Jesus but time has gone. Look at him and consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He had no good works to offer Jesus. Roman Catholics are confounded by this thief because he was not even baptised. But that very day as he cried to Jesus for mercy Jesus saved him. He was dead spiritually and about to die physically. But, *but God*, but Jesus Christ, by the power of his blood *made him alive together with Christ* (2:5). Jesus said to him *today you will be with me in paradise* (Luke 23:43).

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