

What Kind of Savior Do You Need?

Pastor John Beeson

Ephesians 2:1-10

July 6, 2008

This year we've been preaching through Ephesians. We've been on a break for the past month and a half or so, but we return today. It took us much of the first semester to preach through the first chapter, a wonderful prayer that speaks of God's glorious plan and the spiritual blessings offered to us through our Lord, Christ Jesus.

Last week Pastor Matt preached on the purposes of our enemy, Satan, and before that he preached a series on "Losing Jesus" where we reflected on the ways in which we lose Jesus in this day and age and how we can remember him. Because of this, our re-entry into Ephesians today is particularly providential in the way it ties all these things together and moves us forward. The sermon last week – on the purposes of Satan – is front and center in this passage. And the other series – the way our culture makes us lose Jesus – will frame the way we engage this passage to show how radical our salvation is and what kind of savior we need.

In order to get us back into the swing of Ephesians let's move back a bit to get the context of the moving prayer that precedes our passage today:

2:1-10. 2:1-10 continues and applies to the readers the major theme on which Paul has now launched, namely, the power of God's actions in Christ.

Read Ephesians 1:15-2:10

The lowest point in the continental US is also the most desolate and hottest – Death Valley, California. Death Valley is completely barren: of people, wildlife, and even plant life. But just 80 miles to the Northwest of Death Valley is the highest point in the continental US – Mt. Whitney. Mt. Whitney is a majestic mountain. Typically snowcapped and dotted with evergreens it is a haven for recreation and wildlife.

Kent Hughes, a now-retired pastor describes his experience with his youth group at the top of Mt. Whitney: “We exulted over the wonderful panorama of the Sierra Nevadas and the Mojave Desert. What a spot, with its rarefied, crystal-clear air, its indigo and turquoise lakes – vista giving way to vista as far as one could see.” Hughes goes on too explain the psychological impact of having Death Valley rest by the side of Mt. Whitney: “What a contrast! One place is the top of the world, the other the bottom. One place is perpetually cool, the other relentlessly hot. From Mt. Whitney you look down on all of life. From Death Valley you can only look up to the rest of the world.”¹

¹ Kent Hughes *Ephesians*

In Ephesians 2 Paul takes us down to the Death Valley of the Soul (vv 1-3) and then up to ‘the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus’ (vv. 4-7).

Paul’s method is contrast: from death to life, from Hell to Heaven, from bondage to freedom, from pessimism to optimism. The journey’s contrast will enhance our appreciation for what we have in Christ and will influence the way we live.

We’re going to spend two sermons on this rich passage. Today we’re going to focus on us and next week we’re going to focus on God. Don’t worry, though, I won’t leave all of Mt. Whitney for next week... we’ll move out of Death Valley a bit. Let’s then navigate these verses today with a simple four-point outline. The first three points will be taken directly from Paul’s three descriptors of who we are in verses 1-3 – the last point will be the application of these descriptors to us practically. As we move through this sermon we will be heading toward the answer of one question in particular: what kind of savior do we need?

Paul’s take on who we are outside of and before Christ is a bit of a downer. He says that we are:

- 1) Dead
- 2) Followers of Satan
- 3) Followers of ourselves.

Let's start with dead. Dead: really? The chapter begins, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." Trespasses and sins are two of the words that are used to describe sin in the Bible. Interestingly enough, they are two of the most minor descriptors of sin.

Trespass is self-explanatory – it is a false step or the crossing of a boundary. This is a sin of commission – a willful action against God's law. The second word – translated "sin" here – means missing the mark. This is a sin of omission – a sin whereby we don't follow through in what God calls us to do. By choosing these two particularly minor words dealing with sin, Paul sets the bar as low as it can go. And for even these trivial offenses Paul says that we are DEAD: completely without any breath of spiritual life.

This strikes the modern reader as rather severe. Come on, Paul, you surely don't mean dead, dead, do you?

Well, yes, actually, that is what Paul means. Let's pull back and look at this from our cultural context. One could probably sum up the history of interpretation about the human condition into three camps: 1) those who believe we're basically *well*; 2) those who believe we're basically *sick*; and 3) those who believe we're basically *dead*.

Those in the first camp believe that all we need is some spiritual exercise and some vitamins. 'I'm alright and you're alright' is their motto.

Proponents of the second view agree that we're sick, perhaps even mortally sick, but our situation is certainly not hopeless. A good surgeon can heal us from our spiritual malady. But the Biblical view is that humans are not well or sick, but dead. All our self-help will avail nothing!

You can spend the next six months down at the Princeton Cemetery asking theological questions by the side of Jonathan Edwards' gravestone or historical questions of Aaron Burr six feet under, but no matter how long or loud you talk, you will get no response from them.²

Jeremy Bentham was a 19th Century English philosopher of law who happens to be more famous in his death than his life. As requested in his will, Bentham's body was preserved and stored in a wooden cabinet, termed his "auto-icon." This auto-icon is in University College London and on display in the main building of the College. As per his will, for the 100th and 150th anniversaries of the college, the auto-icon was brought to the meeting of the College Council, where he was listed as "present but not voting."³ That is our state: "present but not voting." We are dead in sin. Dead. We are spiritually lifeless, inanimate.

A life without God (however physically fit and mentally alert the person may be) is a living death, and that those who live it are dead even

² Kent Hughes *Ephesians*

while they are living.⁴ It feels uncomfortable, it feels judgmental to make that kind of statement, but anything short of understanding our life outside of Christ as death falls short of telling the truth.

Onto the second descriptor of us before Christ has us: we are followers of Satan. Paul says, we were “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.”

Five years ago a survey studying Americans’ spiritual beliefs was published. It’s not that surprising to find that 59% of Americans reject the existence of Satan. Perhaps what’s more surprising, and what reveals how spiritually schizophrenic we are is that 54% affirmed that “a human being can be under the control or the influence of spiritual forces such as demons.”⁵ For those of you keeping track at home, that’s 41% who gave the thumbs up to the existence of Satan but 54% to demons. So... yes to the legions, no to the commander in chief. We believe in evil, but nothing too strong or out of our spiritual control

Scripture stands in stark contrast to that perspective. Not only does Satan exist, but even more, as unbelievers we once followed him.

³ Kent Hughes *Ephesians* and Wikipedia

⁴ John Stott *Ephesians*

⁵ Barna survey, 2002. www.barna.org

I love the story of the little girl who was disciplined by her mother for kicking her brother in the shins and then pulling his hair. “Sally,” said her mother, “why did you let the Devil make you kick your little brother and pull his hair?” To which she answered, “The Devil made me kick him, but pulling his hair was my idea!”⁶ We were his because all we did opposed the Kingdom of God, whether or not we realized it.

Like Sally’s mom, our tendency can be to think of Satan’s work as something that happens outside of ourselves; for example, we blame Satan’s work in situations or in other people as the temptations that cause us to sin. Yet Paul presents Satan’s work in a different manner in this passage; he stresses that the problem is not outside of ourselves, but rather the problem is of the “Sally” variety: the problem is our corrupt hearts, which willingly and freely satisfy our worldly lusts.⁷

The third descriptor Paul uses of us is that we are followers of ourselves. To that the modern world would say: “I would hope so!” But Paul’s take on us following our own dreams and desires isn’t nearly as positive as the world’s take: “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Paul says: we did what we

⁶ Kent Hughes *Ephesians*

wanted to do: what our bodies wanted to do, what our hearts wanted to do, what our minds wanted to do – but this was not an expression of our freedom, but rather of our imprisonment.

We were imprisoned to our own will – and our will was imprisoned to the world and the ruler of the world. Hear this: there is no greater lie that Satan has perpetrated on the modern world than that true freedom is found in our self-expression. There is no greater exhibition of our imprisonment than self-expression as the modern world understands it.

The lie is that we're born into a morally neutral or morally good state. In the same survey I referenced earlier, 74% of Americans in general and 52% of American evangelicals in particular reject the notion of original sin – that is, that we're born in a state of sin.⁸ The average American thinks that our spiritual state is neutral or positive. In other words, you put the average group of people out on an island and you're more likely to wind up with *Gilligan's Island* than *Lord of the Flies*.

But our rebellion against God as unbelievers is active. Outside of Christ we are not morally neutral, we are morally sinful. We *walked* in the course of this world. We were: children of wrath; subject to the evil rule of Satan (Gal 4:3; Col 1:13); unable to change ourselves from rebellion against

⁷ Thabiti Anyabwili sermon on Ephesians 2:1-10 at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, 2003.

God (John 3:3); exposed to the just anger of God (Rom 1:18-20). For the Christian, when was the last time that you reflected on the deepness of the hell from which you were saved? A list of your sins would show that the problem of your rebellion against God was a radical problem that demanded a radical solution.⁹

To the American ear – Christian and non-Christian alike, then, Paul’s words: that we are enemies to Christ, dead in sin, captive to an alien power, and children of wrath – these words come as a shock, as totally out of touch.

And that’s a question for you: if you’re already a Christian, do you accept this assessment of your pre-Christian state? If you’re an unbeliever, do you accept this as an assessment of your life? As you examine your soul do you think you’re really free, or do you have a sneaking suspicion that you’re not free at all, but only a slave to yourself and perhaps even a slave to something far more malevolent?

Let’s move to the final point and apply this in two ways: first to our testimonies and second to the question at hand: “what kind of savior do you need?”

Let me ask you to do something after this service: tell your spouse, or your mom or dad, or your friend your testimony. I hope you all have told

⁸ 2002 Barna survey. www.barna.org

your testimony before. If you haven't, you should learn how to tell your testimony. Tell that significant other that you're talking with about your spiritual journey.

Now I wish that we could all stop right now and tell one another our testimonies because that would illustrate my next point better, but I'm going to give you the cheat sheet before you tell your testimony. And because we can't tell those stories now, think back to when you have had the chance to share your testimony and examine how you have told your story.

Does your testimony reflect these verses? Paul is telling us the story of where all of our spiritual journeys begin. Is this what your story looks like?

Now notice what that means about our salvation. If you're dead before you are saved, who is the actor in your salvation? Is it you reaching out to God? Is our salvation the story of dawning spiritual enlightenment over time? No! Salvation comes from God. God is the actor in our salvation stories. He is the central character. Now, I'm not saying that we don't have a role to play, but I'm saying that all too often the way we frame our spiritual journey is of us discovering God. That is fundamentally untrue.

⁹ Thabiti Anyabwili sermon on Ephesians 2:1-10 at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, 2003.

After dropping us down to the bottom of Death Valley, Paul takes us, like we were on one of those carnival rides that drops you down and then shoots you up – Paul shoots us up to the top of Mount Whitney with two little words:

“But God.”

“But God.” We were dead. We were followers of Satan. We were followers of ourselves. But God. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” What a God. What a story we have. It’s not the story of us finding God, but the story of God’s rescue mission of us. The thought that we worked out our own salvation is laughable: 1) because we were dead; 2) because we were working against God! See God’s work in your life in a new light. See his glorious and gracious sovereign hand and be filled with gratitude.

But I’m sure there are some here today who know that that sort of rescue hasn’t happened in their hearts yet. Or some of you are frankly unsure about the source of your salvation. Well, let me ask you something: what kind of savior do you need? What sort of forgiveness do you need?

Scripture is clear: you need a savior who is completely outside of yourself. You cannot save yourself. Only God can save you. And what

kind of savior has he sent? He has sent a savior who, because he was brought from death to life can bring you from death to life. He has sent a savior who has shown us immeasurably his grace and kindness. He has sent us a savior who offers forgiveness – real forgiveness. Forgiveness as we experience is all too often the kind of half-hearted (or quarter-hearted!) forgiveness that I coax out of my children: either thoughtless or forced, and almost always to achieve the end in sight – playing or dessert or whatever.

Jesus offers forgiveness that is alien to our experience of forgiveness as humans. Until the Holy Spirit works in our heart, we see our sins as sins against others, but when the Holy Spirit does his work we see the truth: our sins are sins against God. Jesus offers forgiveness as the true recipient of our sins – the one who all of our sins are fundamentally directed against, and the one who actually paid the price to offer forgiveness for those very sins committed against himself. You, being found guilty of crimes against God find God serving your sentence willfully and lovingly.

He is the one who suffered the wrath that was deserved by us, the death that was deserved by us. That is forgiveness. That is costly, precious forgiveness. That is the kind of savior we need. That is the kind of savior we have. A savior who has lavished us with grace, who has brought us to life through that costly grace.

Charles Spurgeon, 19th Century Baptist Preacher tells this story of a former pirate he knew:

I recollect an old sea captain told me after a sermon that he had served under the black flag for fifty years, and by the grace of God he would tear the old rag down, and run up the blood red cross at the mast-head. I recommended him not merely to change his flag, but to see that the vessel was repaired, but he wisely replied that repairing would be of no use to such an old water-logged hulk, and he had better scuttle the old ship, and have a new one. I reckon that is the best thing to do, to be dead indeed unto sin, and made alive in Christ Jesus; for you may do what you will with the old wreck of fallen nature, you will never keep it afloat. The old man must be crucified with Christ, it must be dead, and buried, and sunk fifty thousand fathoms deep, never to be heard of again. In the new vessel which Jesus launches in the day of our regeneration, with the blessed flag of atoning blood above us, we will sail to

heaven convoyed by irresistible grace, giving God the glory for ever and every.

That's the kind of savior we need. Not a savior of cheap grace, of quick fixes; not a savior that comes from within our selves – no, a savior who takes our dead selves and sinks us fifty thousand fathoms deep only to rise us anew with Christ.

Ask for forgiveness, then. Your forgiveness is costly – it was purchased with your savior's blood. But it is not given begrudgingly, but freely; it is not given sparingly, but lavishly. Because Jesus Christ is the very kind of savior we need.

Pray