

An Eternal Promise
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

Ephesians 2:1--10 (NRSV)

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.
(NRSV)

Introduction and Comments:

This morning I want to share with you a story because it is not only a good lead in to my message but also a somewhat humorous but dark truth.

This man was walking across a bridge one day, and saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. The man immediately ran over and said "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" the would-be jumper said.

The man said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

"Like what?"

"Well ... are you religious or an atheist?"

"Religious."

"Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?"

"Christian."

"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too! Are you Episcopalian, Baptist, or what?"

"Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

"Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"

To which the would-be rescuer said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed the man off the bridge.

Sermon:

Most New Testament scholars believe the Letter to the Ephesians was written by a third-generation Christian in Ephesus, not by the Apostle Paul.

Paul, as we know, was a highly-enculturated Hellenistic Pharisaical Jew. Paul, like many Jews, believed that an Israelite theocracy - the kingdom of God - was coming on earth and would be ushered in by the Jewish Messiah, whom Paul and others proclaimed was the crucified, resurrected, and soon-to-return Jesus, cosmic Lord of the universe.

Paul, after his encounter with the risen Jesus, felt a divine compulsion to go to those areas outside of Palestine where the Jews were the minorities among the other peoples to tell them about God's latest innovation in the Good News of Jesus, the risen Christ. Paul did this in part because many of the Jews in the Diaspora did not have a well-developed and extensive body of the Pharisaical oral laws or messianic insights and expectations as did the Palestinian and Judean Israelites. Therefore, those enclaves of Israelites outside of the rabbinic networks in Palestine and Judea became Paul's missionary field.¹

As Paul completed his evangelistic work in one community, he left not only a body of Jesus-believers in place but also Christian leaders. After Paul's death and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, many of these local leaders became not only the rehabilitators of Paul's writings and thoughts but his successors as interpreters and innovators in the Gospel such as the author of Ephesians.

The letter of Ephesians was meant to be circulated to various Jesus groups or churches in the author's region. The writer either wants to honor Paul or claim Pauline authority to ensure that the people of his generation read and absorb his evolved insights into God's work in Christ as well as understand their responsibilities to one another as the body of Christ, the church, until Jesus returns. These churches would have been comprised primarily of Hellenistic Jewish Jesus-believers of varying degrees of compliance with the Mosaic Laws and traditions along with non-Israelite Jesus-believers.

The author of Ephesians was familiar with various Pauline writings, especially the letters of Colossians and Romans, and writes from within the Pauline view of the corrupted state of creation, the human will, and Satan, the Power or powers of darkness that hold sway over this world.

Paul understood that once Adam and Eve had given into the temptation of the serpent, whom many of the era identified with Satan, they introduced into created reality the actuality that things could be contrary to God's will, something evidently that had existed only as a potential prior to their choosing to eat from the forbidden tree.

So, the thinking goes that with the introduction of corruption into this order of reality, which per legend had already occurred in the divine realm by Lucifer, the "power or powers of the air" gained an inroad into this created world. The final consequence of this corruption is death in this realm of created reality. Since Satan or the Dark Powers are limited, they cannot rule or hold influence in the world beyond this one because God booted them out; therefore, there is hope for humanity only in Christ through the portal of death or by being changed by God in the twinkling of an eye at the coming of the kingdom.

Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 15 that this perishable body cannot inherit the kingdom of God but must put on an imperishable body. In death or on that final day in time, the dead will either be resurrected or changed in victory over death. For some, there will be a resurrection to a positive

¹ Malina, Bruce J. and John J. Pilch. Social-Science Commentary on the Deutero-Pauline Letters. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2013. Pp. 1-2.

afterlife of glory and honor; for others, a negative afterlife characterized by being cut off from positive relationships with God and others, a hellish experience.

Let me also add that we should not try to substitute modern Western ideas of psychopathology, natural disasters, or negative cause and effect for Paul's and our author's understandings of the source of corruption, evil, and death. To do so not only defrauds Paul and his world views, but his understanding of God's power, presence, and purposes in Jesus of Nazareth. To this I would add, there may be some modern understandings of human psychology, sociology, anthropology, and physics in which Christians may logically understand God, human nature, evil, Jesus, and our relationship to God and keep faith with the spirit of truth in scripture. However, we must not try to lay such understandings on the Apostle Paul or upon the author of Ephesians.

In Ephesians, the author does not seem to be addressing any particular theological or Christological issues per se, but rather reiterating much of the Apostle Paul's thoughts about Jesus as the Christ while exhorting and encouraging people to be obedient to the will of God in Christ by how they accept, treat, and relate to one another. The author reminds his audiences that they have all at one time or another lived outside the pale of God's will and were ruled by the dark forces of passion and self-interest. I think the author is alluding here to many of the practices and cultural accommodations of Hellenism into his people's Judaism, which would have been seen by some as compromises of God's laws. This living by the passions of the flesh could also include people's unhealthy zeal to live by the Mosaic Laws and traditions, including circumcision and certain purity codes, while indicting, offending, and excluding others considered less compliant.

As a side note or interesting factoids, those Hellenistic Israelite families who had lived outside the Holy Lands for many, many decades prior to and after the Maccabean Revolt, did not always practice the rite of circumcision or necessarily have or follow all the purity codes of the Judean Pharisees, but still saw themselves as people of the covenant. Interestingly, the more observant Palestinian and Judean Jews often referred to their Hellenists counterparts, whether compliant or non-compliant with Mosaic traditions, as those who lived as other people as Greeks or Gentiles. To call someone a Greek was to say they were cultured because there was no Greece at the time.

The author of Ephesians seems to hold Paul's perspective on the Mosaic Law. As much as the Law can be and should be viewed as a gift of God's love for human benefit, it is a double-edged sword. The Law tells people what is right and good, what they ought to do, ought not to do, or how to be holy. However, the corrupted human will, being what it is, can never achieve the degree of righteousness necessary to be restored to an original relationship with God, the self, others, or creation. Thus, the Law often stands like some demonic treadmill and a testimony to the faithful's helplessness and hopelessness no matter how hard they try to fulfill the mandates of the Law. As our author says, there is nothing people can do to conquer the power of death and corruption on their own, no matter what they do.

To this end, God's love, power, and presence in the Good News and person of Jesus comes into the human condition as God's unmerited favor - God's grace. In Jesus' faithfulness unto death in deed and spirit he received not only a personal victory over the power of death, Satan's last and greatest power, but satisfied Adam's and Eve's affront to God's sovereignty and honor for all humanity. Those who are in the world as Jesus, living by faith in God and God's grace, ever looking to live God's will in ways of love, are also assured of a victory over death as was Jesus and are now elevated to his holy status.

As we will read later in Ephesians 2, those in Christ - whether they are highly compliant or non-compliant Jews of the Diaspora, Judean Jews, or non-Jewish believers in Christ - all share in the redemptive work and victorious nature of the resurrected Christ and are restored to God. The believer simply awaits the completion of this restored relationship in either death or a divine change of state at the coming of the kingdom in its fullness. By the blood of Christ, God has made both

believing groups of Jews and non-Jews alike into a new whole, breaking down the dividing walls of the law with its commandments and ordinances by creating a new humanity, not so much a new human covenant community as new beings in Christ.

Therefore, let us remember as the author of Ephesians tells his audiences, that even though we in the greater body of Christ may be from different backgrounds, different world views, different life philosophies, different expressions of the Christian faith, we nonetheless share in the common human condition and the eventuality of death. We are powerless over this end, but since the dawn of human reasoned self-reflection we have believed that this is not all there is. There is yet another dimension to our existence.

Our only hope in the next life and in escaping the debilitating and corrupting anxieties of death in this life lie in the hands of our Creator/Sustainer, not ours. Our Creator/Sustainer has revealed in Jesus the Christ, as the first product of the Good News - an eternal promise of victory over death and a positive afterlife grounded in God's love. In short, a promise of restoration to God, to self, others, creation, and creature uninfluenced by pride of will and self-interest with unlimited, eternal potential in God.

Therefore, as those Palestinian or Judean Jesus-believers and the Ephesian Jesus-believers were made to understand they were bound together in Christ across so-called doctrinal divides and practices, so must we be made to understand. We must not let cultural or doctrinal differences become justifications for sin, that is pushing others off the bridge in disobedience to God's will and our unity in Christ. In obedience to God's work in Christ, we must promote harmony within the family of God, not division. We must recognize that many of our differences have more to do with the idiosyncrasies of culture; that is, life-maintenance and survival strategies in different environments and settings, than they do with right or wrong, morality or immorality.

We must remember who and what God has made us to be, new beings in Christ Jesus for the purposes of good works.

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