

“Status Change” GPPC 3-11-18
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10

You’ve probably had this happen to you. Sitting at home I’ve answered the front doorbell and been met by a couple of members of a religious sect. Usually it’s a man and a woman. They always have some of their literature in hand. They are polite. I just happen to believe (as probably most of you do) that they are wrong about some key theological issues. Sometimes I’ll offer them a drink of water or tell them I’m a Presbyterian pastor, and that’s enough to send them hurrying back to their car.

But I’ve noticed they have a strategy for how they visit. They try to hand you one of their tracts and then they launch into a speech about various things that are going wrong in the world—crime, poverty, destruction of the environment, and so on. And then they’ll ask, “Don’t you agree that the world is in trouble?” And what are you going to say? “No. I think everything is perfect.” You can’t say that truthfully. But if you agree with them, they’ll say, “Good news! We have the solution. Could we come in and chat for a while?”

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This is the problem/solution model. And a lot of Christian preaching also follows the problem/solution model. The preacher doesn't waste a lot of time establishing rapport with the listeners or easing into difficult subjects. Nope. He or she spends the first part of the sermon getting the congregation to understand what a terrible predicament we are in. We are "sinners in the hands of an angry God" as the evangelist Jonathan Edwards put it in 1741. And only after spending a few, interminable minutes helping us feel like spiritual slugs destined to be tossed into the eternal bonfires of hell does the preacher finally offer us a solution to our problem.

Well, this morning's reading from Ephesians is also a problem/solution text, but not exactly as Edwards put it.

Scholars believe the letter to the Ephesians was written by a student of the Apostle Paul probably around 80 or 85 A.D. The letter summarizes many of Paul's central teachings, and it's considered one of the "general letters" of Paul, focused not so much on speaking to one particular church than to all churches.

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In chapter one of this letter, the writer begins with a greeting, then a section of praise to God, and a prayer. Then we come to the first ten verses of chapter two which we just read. Here in verses 1-3 the writer sketches what our problem *was*, past tense. And he uses a number of different images to make his point vivid. He 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.”

A character in one of Walker Percy’s novels thinks to himself, “The name of this century is the Century of the Love of Death. Death in this century is not the death people die but the death people live. [People] love death because real death is better than the living death. That’s why [we] like wars, of course. Why do [we] settle so easily for lives which are living deaths? [We] either kill each other in war, or in peace walk docilely into living death as sheep into a slaughterhouse.”

(Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*, 246.)

Maybe this is what the writer of Ephesians is getting at—lives that are living deaths. He says we once followed “the ruler of the power of

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the air,” a way of referring to evil or the devil or Satan. Further, we once lived out “the passions of our flesh” and “we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.”

Let’s define these volatile terms. When you hear the expression, “the passions of our flesh,” what do you think of? Some sort of illicit sexual behavior, right? And that’s certainly part of what the writer means. But “the passions of our flesh” is broader; it’s a way of describing how we sin by using these bodies of ours. Yes, sometimes we sin with destructive, rather than loving sexual behavior. But we also sin with other actions, thoughts, and words. Maybe we sin with drunkenness, gluttony, disgust about our appearance, undue pride about our appearance, lust, anger, lies, jealousy, arrogance, gossip, contempt for others, selfishness, failure to keep the Sabbath, lack of gratitude to God, and the list goes on. “The passions of our flesh” are many, and we all have something to repent of, right?

So the writer says we were “children of wrath.” In other words, we were convicted of our sin and afflicted with the consequences of our sin. And when it comes to sin’s consequences, I believe it’s less about God

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punishing us for sinning, and more about the natural consequences of sin. For example, if we spend our lives lying, we become someone that nobody can trust. So we hurt ourselves and others. If we spend our time gossiping, then we hurt the person we gossip about, the people who hear the gossip, and ourselves. If we fail to keep Sabbath, then we enslave ourselves in work. If we spend our lives in lust, then we miss out on true love.

God is not mean to us, but sin has natural consequences. In fact, as one scholar says, “In the Bible the ‘wrath’ of God...does not represent the intemperate outburst of an uncontrolled character. It is rather the temperature of God’s love, the manifestation of [God’s] will and power to resist, to overcome, to burn away all that contradicts [God’s] counsels of love.” (Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, 231-232.) In other words, God is not an irrational, raging tyrant who punishes without restraint. No. God is a passionate lover of humanity and the world. And God’s wrath is love burning away that which is harmful in order to leave that which is life-giving.

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So now the writer of Ephesians moves from problem to solution. He says we were dead through our trespasses and sins, following the “ruler of the power of the air” (evil), and living in the passions of our flesh. “Doctor, what’s the patient’s status?” “Dead,” says the doctor.

But now the writer says God has changed our status, not once but at least twice (depending on how you do the counting). He writes, “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

Did you catch the status change, the movement upward with each change? We *were* dead. Then we were made alive together with Christ, saved (from our sins and for God’s purposes), raised. And then we were seated with Christ in the heavenly places. All of this is the work of God. And all of this is past tense.

This is really one of the more extraordinary passages in all of the Bible, and I have some trouble understanding it. One professor says, “...We too are actually raised up with Christ and are seated with him in

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the heavenly places. This is an astonishing proposal. To say that we are now seated with Christ goes beyond what Paul has ever said and seems, on the face of it, absurd. After all, we are still right here.” (Lewis R.

Donelson, *Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus*, 70.)

So what does the writer mean? Maybe he is describing what Christians call “the already and not yet” of the good news. This status change has *already* happened for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But like someone waking from a long sleep, we simply are not fully aware of what has happened. So we are gradually awakening and living into what has happened.

In fact, one scholar says, “God may be said to reenact the death and resurrection of Christ within the baptism of each believer. (Carl R. Holladay in *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year B, Lent, Holy Week, Easter*, 61.)

And what does this have to do with you and me and our everyday lives? Everything. Everything.

So you and I seem to be just muddling along, living these apparently ordinary lives. Maybe things are going pretty well, and we’re enjoying life most of the time. But there’s the kid at school--maybe she

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doesn't feel popular or she is even picked on. Or there's the college student, not exactly straight A's. Or the struggling mom or dad. Or somebody having a tough time at work. Or the retiree trying to get used to retirement. Or maybe even the person who is nearing the end of life. In each of these cases, maybe we are tempted to despair. We think we aren't quite good enough, don't measure up. We didn't leave a big enough mark on the world. We're not famous. Our time here is so brief. And our brief lives didn't mean very much.

But that's not what God says. According to the writer of Ephesians, we are *already* not only made alive together with Christ, saved (*from* our sins and *for* God's ministry) and raised, but we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. In other words, we are royalty.

We are royalty. And this is not something we've done. As the writer says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

There is a reality beyond what we see with our eyes. As disciples of Christ, whether we feel like life is going well or whether we feel that

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we are not really measuring up, in Christ we are by God's grace, in fact, royalty.

So this transforms our life on earth. We don't need to scurry into a frenzy of good deeds in order to earn God's love. God's love is freely given. Instead, we know, as the writer says, that we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works." But we have a new status, royalty.

So we don't need to sit around worrying if we're saved and trying to scare people with threats of hell. And we don't need to do good works to convince God to love us or forgive us. We do good works, because we were created to do them. We were put on this earth not simply to get ourselves to heaven. No. We were put on this earth to live in trust and gratitude and service. I read online this morning that whenever our ancestor Presbyterians went to a new place they established a church, a school, and a hospital. We were made to help make the world a better place.

One of our church members (and a friend) was talking to me this week. She was encouraging me to say something about how God works in and through us daily. And according to the writer of Ephesians, she is

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right. No good thing we ever do is wasted. Every kind word, every kind gesture, whether it is given to a friend, an enemy, a spouse, a child, a worker, a person without a home, every kindness matters. No good thing is ever wasted. Every time the truth is spoken in love. Every act of forgiveness. Every time we work to create more humane government policies. Every time we reject bigotry and embrace diversity. None of this is wasted. It is all part of God working through us, royalty that we are. And if for some reason we neglect do these things or we are tempted to despair, then God calls us to remember who and whose we are-- royalty who belong to Christ.

“What’s your status?” “Well, I was dead, but now I am royalty.”

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal