

From Death to Life

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Lent / Grace; Dead Person / Numbers 21:4–9; Psalm 107:1–9; Ephesians 2:1–10; John 3:14–21

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.

One thing that I do not like to do is ride on a roller coaster. I'm not a fan of the heights, the speed, the whiplash. I have thought that I would die during the plunge from the top point, as we are going up. I am always a fan when we finally arrive at the bottom and can get out of the little car. Today in our text, St. Paul takes us on a roller coaster ride. In the first three verses, he drops us in a terrifying plunge, a hair-raising free fall—speaking on the depths of the condition of all humanity. We are enslaved by our own sinful desires, and the world and Satan try to control us. Then, just when we think we are surely dead (no, actually when we realize we *really were dead*), in verses 4-6 he pulls us out of it; we see God's mercy and grace as he provides salvation for us in Christ. That's the big moment, the center of the ride! The moment when against all those g-force we're pulled up from death to life. As we first understand and recognize our problem (Law), we then are enabled truly to understand our redemption: because of what Christ has done for us (Gospel), we are made alive to him. And finally climbing out of that center the ride, in verses 7-10 we thank and praise God for his astonishing grace and, through him and by his grace, live a life for others.

Paul actually achieves this effect in our text by using a literary device called a chiasm. That's where the first element, and the most important words are in the center like the center of the roller-coaster ride. It'll be interesting to discover what those words are in the very center of our text.

We were dead to sin...and we walked like it. I was in fourth or fifth grade, I don't quite remember, it's the first time that I remember seeing a corpse in the casket. The body lay still, unable to move, no signs of breathing. The skin was

off-color, almost like a mannequin. Like that corpse in the coffin, we can do nothing toward our salvation! Dead people can't do anything. The deadness of our sins means we are powerless and beyond hope. Without God's grace, we don't even see our lost condition. We have no "fear, love, and trust in God."

We were dead in sin by our very nature. We are conceived and born in sin, having inherited the fallen nature from Adam. Natural man is corrupt and estranged from God. Your nature is hostile to God and opposes him. We are "children of wrath," disobedient and evil. Natural man cannot accept the Gospel of Christ when it is preached to him.

As Luther says in the Formula of Concord: "A person is like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife...indeed, like a log and a stone. He like a lifeless statue, which uses neither eyes nor mouth, neither sense nor heart...Indeed, all teaching and preaching is lost on him until he is enlightened, converted, and regenerated by the Holy Spirit."

But we also walked as dead men, people dead in sin, following the world and subject to the influence of Satan. We were "carrying out the desires of the body and mind" We are now carrying out the desires of the body and mind. The desires of the body and mind are many as we examine ourselves in light of the 10 Commandments. The list of sins is lengthy that you and I commit on a daily basis...whether it's idolatry, gossip, greed, lust, hate, disrespect or anything else.

Did you notice the switch from the pronoun "you" to "we" in verses 1, 2, and 3? Paul is not only describing the Gentiles but also the Jews. All people, Jews and Gentiles are equally condemned and hopeless. That includes you and me. Paul himself, that cruel persecutor Saul, thought he deserved God's approval. Extremely religious and zealous, he tried dramatically to be more deserving than anyone. As he proved to himself and to the world, religion, with its attempts to "get right" with God is not the answer. The opposite is the truth. God wants to save people by his grace alone. St. Paul (who is called the Apostle of Grace" because of his conversion by the resurrected Christ--found out that his salvation was entirely a free gift

Because of God's grace, we are alive in Christ. The word *but* in verse 4 introduces the great changesection in Scripture, the center of this roller-coaster ride. The condition of mankind is not in fact hopeless. God has sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to save his lost and dead creatures. God's love and mercy moved him to rescue us from our lost and condition. God did not give us his grace because we were worthy nor because there was naything good in us. Rather, it is because of his goodness and mercy and love for sinners.

So God sends his Son into the world to suffere and die in the sinner's place...in your place—while we were yet sinners, while we were still dead, lost, and condemned. We receive his abundant grace through Christ and Him alone.

We who were dead have been raised to new life with him. We who were slaves to sin have been set free from sin, the world, our flesh. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. Now we are servants of the one who has given us new life and set uf free.

And which words that say all this are the center of Paul's chiasm, the key words that pull us out of that roller-coaster plunge? We read it in verse 5

“By grace you have been saved.” This is the center of it all!

Even our conversion, being *made* alive, is a miracle of God's grace! Through the working of the Holy Spirit, through the Word, we are changed in a moral condition. We are no longer aliens but God's beloved Children, called out of darkness into his marvelous light! We are now no longer seen by God in our condition of sin but seen in the light of what Christ has done in and for us. We are forgiven, brought about by the Word and Baptism. A change in our nature has occurred through the “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

There is an inner change. Because we are now justified by God's grace, we have a new desire, a new will, and new thoughts centered in the Gospel. We desire not to sin...I don't want to, but yet I still struggle with it and will until the day I die. Our desire toward God is now to confess our sins, to repent, and by faith to receive forgiveness on a daily basis. Whereas before we were turned away from him, we are directed to God, to His Word and Sacraments.

We now recognize God as the Father of all mercy, Jesus as our Savior and Redeemer, and in Christ, we recognize God as our Father. God and heaven are now opened to us. Paul emphasizes that it is God who did all this. Conversion is solely God's Work. God has removed our spiritual inability to trust in him, given us new spiritual powers, given us spiritual understanding, a new heart, will, and spiritual emotions. God was moved by his love, mercy, and grace. This deliverance from our former life of bondage and sin excludes force or coercion. We are brought to faith through the Word, the GOspel, which alone changes us by God's power.

We are now alive by grace...and we "walk" in it. God's purpose to save the sinner is not just temporal but eternal. The grace of God is on display for all eternity. Salvation is all of God's doing: this brings him glory for all to know and see. Many of know by heart

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8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

How rich is this! God's grace is so rich! We are saved by grace and not by our works and this is through faith! No one can boast of what we've done. God has done it all!

Many of us know those last two verses but yet we forget the last verse of our text which reads:

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10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Here, Paul speaks of the effects of the Gospel in the believer's life! Good deeds follow faith! Sanctification follows justification. Even our good works are wrought by God. These words that we do have already been ordained and prepared for us to do. Therefore we simply "walk in them"—walking in the grace by which we've been saved!

I confidently tell you that as a believer in the cross of Christ you are saved by grace, which comes from God by faith in Jesus alone! That is the center of it all.

When I was on a roller coaster as I was going up, I thought death was coming, but when the climax happens, the top of the roller coaster, I realized that life was coming, life on the ground. It was thrilling to come down even if it was painful. We have to realize that as we walk in the Christian life, as we deny ourselves and take up our cross, it isn't easy! Life is ours though through the cross. God is taking care of us! When we come down the coaster, God now gives us good work to do and those good works have been carried out in God.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, our Lenten King. Amen.