

“IN IT TOGETHER - 4”
From objects of wrath to works of art
Ephesians 2:1-10

When I was at secondary school we still did Latin as a subject. And we were taught by the Headmaster, Mr Ashurst. One of the books we had to read for O-Level was *The Gallic Wars* by Julius Caesar and I remember Jake (as he was known) saying at one point, “If I’d been Caesar’s Latin teacher I would have put a red line right through this passage. It’s appalling grammar!” It’s a bit like that with Paul’s *Letter to the Ephesians* which we’re working our way through on Sunday mornings at the moment. The great Apostle Paul has written this letter to the new Christian communities in what is now Turkey, a letter that was first read to the Christians in the busy seaport of Ephesus by Paul’s colleague Tychicus, before being taken round to the other churches in the area to be read out to them as they gathered for worship each week.

And we have already seen that Paul is just so enthusiastic about his subject – the amazing love of God and the need of his followers to be united in their communication of it – that he gets quite carried away as he dictates to his assistant. Paul is actually chained to a guard in prison in Rome, so his letters would have been taken down by someone else as he dictated them. Much of the first chapter in Greek is all one sentence, as Paul gets almost inarticulate in his eagerness to express his praise to God. And the passage we’ve read this morning is much the same: the grammar is all over the place and Jake would almost certainly have put a red line through the lot (he taught us Greek as well). William Barclay, in his *Daily Study Bible*, puts it like this:

In this passage Paul’s thought flows on regardless of the rules of grammar; he begins sentences and never finishes them; he begins with one construction and halfway through he glides into another. That is because this is far more a lyric of the love of God than a careful theological exposition. The song of the nightingale is not to be analysed by the laws of musical composition. The lark sings for the joy of singing. That is what Paul is doing here. He is pouring out his heart, and the claims of grammar have to give way to the wonder of grace. (DSB p95)

Paul is here addressing Christians, followers of Jesus the Christ. But they, like us, are also human beings who have been and who continue to be transformed. He looks at where we’ve come from and at the direction in which we’re going, tracing the activity of God in that transformation. As the late, great John Stott put it, “*Paul first plumbs the depths of pessimism about man, then rises to the heights of optimism about God.*” So let’s try and follow that trajectory in this passage and see what it has to say to us today. Fortunately for us, the translators of this letter from Greek into English have tidied up Paul’s grammar and made it a bit more comprehensible.

1. GOD SAVES US

It's part of the vocabulary of faith, isn't it? We're always talking about it. God *saves* us. Jesus *saves*. We are *saved*. People respond to the gospel and *get saved*. But what is that all about? What are we saved from? Well, Paul pulls no punches here. We are saved, he tells us, from God's wrath. That's a word that is also often linked to religion and which has a kind of divine weight to it – wrath! It's the anger of God, the passionate anger of God – that's what the Greek (*orge*) word here seems to denote.

You see, Paul says, you've been following "*the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air*" – the devil, the personification of evil. The way he talks of following the ways of the world is using a Greek word *peripateo*, from which we get our word "peripatetic". It means "wandering about in", or "journeying through". (Remember that, because we'll come back to it later.) What he is saying is that we have had the wrong worldview, we have been allowing our basic human nature to dictate our attitudes, behaviour and words. Although God created us good, evil has got into the system and the good has become distorted. That means that we don't act as God intended, we are not getting the best out of the life that he gave us, and we feel that in our lack of fulfilment, our dissatisfaction with so much of life.

What we end up doing, he suggests, is "*gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.*" Paul writes elsewhere about what he calls "*the sinful nature*" – sometimes translated as "*the flesh*" – the distortion and perversion of what God had originally created as good. Look at *Galatians 5:19-21*, for example:

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like."

It's taking the good stuff and using it in the wrong way. The good gift of language is used for arguing, swearing and criticising. The enjoyment of food and drink turns into gluttony and drunkenness. The resource of sleep can easily become sloth. The pleasure of sex twists into lust. That's not what God wanted and not what he originally created. So he gets angry.

Just as we look out on the many injustices and inequalities in our world and get angry, telling ourselves and others that these things shouldn't happen, so God gets angry at what he sees as the abuse of his good gifts and the misuse of his creation by humanity. He wants it all done away with. So, Paul says, "*we were all objects of wrath.*" God was angry at what had happened and wanted to put it right. Leaving things as they are is not an option for God. His passionate anger is directed at all those – Jews *and* Gentiles: Paul says to his mainly Jewish converts, "*like the rest*" – who are wandering around in the

wrong area. And that means that the prospect of eternal life spent in his presence is no longer on the cards. That's what Paul means by saying that "*you were dead in your trespasses and sins.*"

And then we have one of "Paul's Big Buts", as we call them. At the beginning of v4, the picture changes. "***BUT*** *because of God's great love for us ...*" There's another possibility. Spending eternity as an object of God's wrath is not the only way ahead. There is, as we are always saying, an alternative. Things do not have to be this way. And God has provided a way out, he has offered to save us from this destiny. We can be made alive again, given that sure hope of life forever as God really wanted it to be. God may be angry – and it's right that he is, given what's happened to his good creation – but he is also "*rich in mercy*" and full of grace. God's mercy means that we don't get what we do deserve; and God's grace means that we do get what we don't deserve. He reaches out to us with this amazing offer: "Trust me and it will be OK, follow my ways and you'll be back on track for an eternity spent with me and all the blessings of that which start here and now, if you want." That's what it means that God has saved us.

2. GOD SEATS US WITH CHRIST

The mercy and grace of God, his transformation of our destiny, have been expressed in, given shape by Jesus Christ. Paul makes two points here. Firstly that we are "***made alive in Christ***". Jesus came into our world – part of God himself, fully divine – but he lived here as a frail, vulnerable human being. He experienced all that we do, except that distortion of our humanity caused by sin. He had to cope with all the stuff that came from everyone else's sin, though, and ended up being crucified through it. Not only was it the sin-influenced actions of others that led to his death, but also it was part of God's plan of grace and mercy for him to somehow deal with the sin of all of us in that death. As he hung there like a cosmic lightning conductor for all the evil in the world, he overcame the power of sin and evil to dictate our destiny. He offered an alternative at last, a choice to reject the sinful nature.

And then, a couple of days later, he went through death and out the other side into that new life, that eternal life that we are promised. He blazed the trail for us so that we could follow him into an eternity with God. That's what Paul means here by saying that we are "***made alive with Christ***". We can share in his risen life. That life stretches on into eternity, but we start to enjoy it now. Just as Jesus remained on earth for a while before joining his Father, so we start to experience the joy – the total, inexplicable, mind-blowing, gob-smacking joy of being transformed by God – right here and now. It's not complete yet and things don't always work out just as we'd like them to, but we have the help of God to live as he wants and to make a difference in this world, even as we wait for our passage into the next.

And that's where the bit about being "*seated with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*" comes in. Part of the problem caused by the distortion and perversion of our humanity is that our true spiritual nature has been messed up – the bit that really connects us with God. So not only are we messed up in all kinds of ways, but we are also less than God wants us to be. Through his grace and mercy, through our acceptance of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we are made whole again – our spiritual nature, the bit that connects us with the "*heavenly realms*", is restored. Once again, we can start to experience all that now, but we will get the full works when we pass into eternity when this life is over, so long as we accept what Jesus has to offer. It's an invitation, not an imposition. Of course, God would love us to accept his offer, but he won't force it on us. Eugene Peterson, who sadly passed away this week, puts it like this in his translation, *The Message*: "*Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus*". That really is something to look forward to!

3. GOD SETS US APART FOR GOOD WORKS

This is all God's doing, of course. Apart from the actual decision to accept his offer of a transformed life and a secure eternity, there is absolutely nothing that we can do. That's what all the stuff about being saved by grace is about. God does it, so it doesn't depend on your status, your intelligence or education, your own resources or finances, your rank or any accident of birth. We're all in the same boat so that no-one has any advantage in this. Anyone and everyone can accept the offer: it's there for you this morning. Because what it all boils down to is that we are all created by God in the first place. We are, as Paul puts it here, "*God's workmanship*", we are God's works of art. [That's what we've been thanking God for in little Charlotte's case especially today. She is a little work of art, a beautiful little creation of God's, bringing joy and love and potential to Peter and Jemimah and her wider family.]

And we are, as James Greene reminded us last week, all unique, each different, with different abilities, different personalities, different things that we can contribute to the life of the communities in which we are set. But we all have at least one thing in common – that we are "*created in Christ Jesus to do good works*". We are designed by God to lead a life of righteousness. Remember that verb we talked about earlier and I said we'd come back to it. Here it is again – *peripateo*. We are to be wandering about in righteousness, journeying in righteousness. As the *NRSV* puts it, "*good works are to be our way of life*".

Now some people will start to bristle at this point – good ol' Protestants who believe with Martin Luther that we are saved by faith not by works. This is all to do with God, they say: it's not up to us to do good works. But Paul doesn't say here (or anywhere else, for that matter) that we are saved **BY** good works.

He's already laid that particular idea to rest in v8 – “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*” But we have been saved **FOR** good works. That's why God has saved us, but left us here rather than whisking us straight off to heaven or wherever you think you'll be spending eternity. Jesus has called you to follow him so that you can make a difference here and now. There are people around you, there are people in this community – in your office or school or gym or street or pub – who need to be shown God's love; who need to be told about the offer of being saved; who need to be given help in righting wrong, overcoming injustice; who need to be told that there is hope, that things do not have to be this way. And those of us who have been saved and who are seated with Christ are the ones who have also been set apart for good works.

That's God's plan in all this – not just a spur of the moment, everything's gone wrong and what can we do, kind of plan. This is all about stuff “*which God prepared in advance for us to do*”. This was God's original plan, what he wanted in the first place, why we are all “*his workmanship*”. But, as we've said, the plan was disrupted as evil leeches into God's good world and things went horribly awry. Through Jesus, though, God has got the plan back on track and wants to restore us to our original place in it. If you are prepared to accept what God has done, what Jesus has done, then you can be included in all this – you'll have the certain hope of life with God for eternity and begin to discover that lost sense of fulfilment and regain a sense of satisfaction in life here and now. I often wonder how people can actually pass that up, reject God's astonishing offer, ignore his astounding grace and mercy.

But if we are going to do that properly, then we have to do it together. And we have to model the values and attitudes of God's Kingdom rule here amongst ourselves. As Christians – God's works of art who are doing good works – we need to be united, to be, as Paul goes on to say, one in Christ. We'll start to look at that, the great theme of this letter, next time we open *Ephesians*, but until then, we can get on and respond to God's grace and mercy by doing a few good works this week.

I'm afraid we've analysed Paul's words this morning, rather than given in to the wonder of grace, as good old William Barclay said, but I hope that in analysing what Paul has to say, we've got ourselves a renewed sense of wonder at just what an amazing God we worship, and that that wonder will inspire us in all that we do this week.

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Questions to think about and discuss

- 1) Who is *"the ruler of the kingdom of the air"* (*v2*)? Do we take him seriously enough?
- 2) What do you understand by God's wrath? Is it a helpful concept? How do we explain it to those who are not yet believers?
- 3) How have you experienced God's grace and mercy? Do you feel it has made a real difference in your life? Can others see that?
- 4) What does it mean to be *"made alive in Christ"*? How do you feel about being *"seated in the heavenly realms"* with him?
- 5) What do you understand by *"good works"* (*v10*)? In what ways can we show them as individuals and as a church?