



HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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Ephesians 2:1-10
Seventh Message
Brian Morgan
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Seven centuries before the birth of Christ, the prophet Isaiah foretold of the first Christmas to a people living in gloom and darkness:

“But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on he shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them.” (Isaiah 9:1-2)

The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were the areas hardest hit by the devastating Assyrian invasion, and to these people the light would come. The testimony of the glorious advent of Emmanuel would be appreciated most by those who were walking in deepest darkness. This was why Jesus settled in Galilee of the Gentiles.

At our men’s Bible study last week, a man who had been living in this kind of darkness shared his testimony. When he was five years old, he told us, he was molested by his father. His parents divorced as news of this surfaced, but he suffered further physical abuse, resulting in 14 broken bones, through his mother’s two subsequent marriages. These traumatic experiences made him angry, bitter and unforgiving. He found he could mask his pain by becoming an over-achiever in school, and he became a straight “A” student. After he graduated, he decided to become a policeman so that he might help people. He joined a local police department, only to discover that almost 40% of his fellow-officers had been molested when they were children. He threw himself into his work, laboring 70 hours a week, and was awarded with a promotion to train the SWAT teams. But even this could not suppress the pain he felt inside, so he founded a business on the side and became rich.

Then one day his life fell apart. It was Thanksgiving Day, he said, and he answered a police call saying a man was brandishing a gun in a residential area. As he was driving to the scene he surmised what this man was probably going through. He had been fired from his job, or lost his girlfriend, he imagined. It was 2 a.m. on Thanksgiving morning. He was probably depressed, and in all likelihood he wanted the police to shoot him. When my friend arrived at the scene, he saw the man sitting on the sidewalk, a 44 magnum by his side, a gun so powerful that a bullet fired from it could penetrate a car engine. The man picked up the gun and pointed it at him. My friend said he should have shot and killed him, but he couldn’t pull the trigger. Eventually he succeeded in talking the man into putting down the gun. Later he discovered that the gun was not loaded. It was apparent that the distraught man wanted to be killed, and it turned out that he had indeed lost his job and his girlfriend had left him.

Although my friend had spared his life, on the way to the police station in his car the man cursed him and spat at him. When

my friend got home later that morning, he knew he had failed at his job. He had jeopardized his own life and the lives of others. If he had to face a similar situation again, he himself would probably be killed. When he realized this, he told us, he felt that his whole life had just come apart.

I watched 70 men glued to their seats as they listened to this man’s testimony. Many of them were moved to tears. How profitable, I thought to myself, are testimonies. When someone is vulnerable and freely speaks of his gloom, anguish and contempt, our hearts empathize with the frailties of the one sharing his weaknesses. As this former policeman spoke of the light of Christ coming to one who had walked only in deepest darkness, our hearts were enlarged for the love and the glory of Christ that is able to restore and rebuild lives that seemed beyond hope.

The testimony of the Ephesian Christians is the apostle Paul’s subject in the text to which we come today in our studies in his letter to the Ephesians. In the opening verses of the letter, we have already seen that Paul wanted Christians everywhere to comprehend the blessings that were theirs in Christ. The first way we comprehend these blessings is through the Scriptures; then, secondly, prayer takes this knowledge and places it in the heart. The third element, as we will see today, is listening to testimonies of the lives of others. Hearing testimonies of how Christ invaded the lives of people and changed them utterly helps enlarge our hearts with the love of Christ. I feel that this is one of the neglected aspects of the Christian life. If we study the apostle’s writing pattern, however, we will discover that the sharing of testimonies is extremely valuable to help us comprehend the depth of our blessings in Christ.

As we begin our text, Paul is describing the condition of the Ephesians before they came to faith.

I. Highway To Hell: The Walking Dead 2:1,2a

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

(a) Symptoms of Death

Paul is quite blunt about the spiritual condition of the Ephesians before they met Christ. “You were dead,” says the apostle. They were the walking dead, totally unresponsive to the life of God. The evidence of this was that they “walked in trespasses and sins.” They were rebels and failures. “Trespasses,” as we have already seen, are rebellious offenses against God that are done in a high-handed way; “sins” convey the idea of missing the mark, of being frustrated by failure.

In the past couple of weeks, I have had ample evidence of how badly I miss the mark, despite my best intentions. Recently I asked Gary Vanderet to teach our men’s group, and when he appeared on the morning scheduled, I forgot I had asked him. Gary was very sensitive and kind. He didn’t embarrass me; he

just slipped out quietly. Later he told me, “When I looked into your eyes, I knew you had forgotten.” Then on Monday morning last I had a vague feeling that I had a breakfast appointment. When I telephoned the restaurant, I found that I had, but I had missed it. On Tuesday morning I had another breakfast appointment, but I missed that one too because I had confused it with my Monday appointment. I finally set a date for Thursday morning with one of the men I had offended, but when I arrived in the restaurant, I saw two of our elders sitting there and I knew I had missed an appointment with them! Despite my best efforts, I was missing the mark. My “sins” had found me out.

Those who doubt the depravity of the human heart should ask themselves, why is it that when we desire to do good, it takes all our effort and resolve and we still fall short? When we do evil, on the other hand, it feels like we’re giving ourselves over to what we could not help doing, and we needed little or no resolve to do so. For instance, we say we suffered “an outburst of anger.” I have yet to hear someone say, however, that he had an “outburst of patience.” It is because our desires alone are not good enough.

So Paul says that the Ephesians were the walking dead before they came to Christ.

(b) The Forces of Death 2:1,2a

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course (age) of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

When you undergo a physical examination, a good doctor, after he evaluates your symptoms, will take a blood test to determine if there are any foreign substances in your bloodstream that are exerting a destructive influence on your body. In the same way, says Paul, the symptoms of rebellion and failure in the lives of the Ephesians before they came to Christ, were indicators that certain forces were at work in their souls. He identifies these forces as the world, the flesh and devil. The Ephesians thought they were free, but upon closer examination it was evident that they were, essentially, acting just like marionettes — someone else was pulling their strings, exerting a powerful force over them. When this happens in inter-personal, family relationships, our generation labels this syndrome “co-dependency.” For example, we think we are free and independent, but when we gather for family occasions, we find we are not free at all because others exert a negative influence upon us, causing us to respond in ways we do not like. At times like this I find myself withdrawing into a shell and reverting into old patterns of behavior.

How vigorous is this disease that is caused by “the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience”? “Working” here means, highly energized. Like AIDS, this is a vigorous disease. Although it may lie dormant for a time, the day will come when it will take over your body completely and destroy you.

Idolatry is a strange thing. We think that when we indulge an idol we can control it, but we soon find that our indulgence, far from satisfying us, only whets our appetite for more. Soon we begin to long for the idol again, so we indulge ourselves once more, but now pleasure is more difficult to achieve so we go farther than we wanted to. Before long we are going beyond limits we thought we would never allow ourselves to come to. So our appetite becomes voracious. It even makes new demands, longing for perverse things, taking over more of our thoughts. We end up with less and less pleasure and more and more indulgence.

How vigorous is the disease that Paul is referring to? Our brother shared on Wednesday that after he had come to the end of himself on that Thanksgiving week, the pain of an unforgiving spirit gnawed ceaselessly in his soul. He began to gamble, but this new idol soon took over and he allowed himself to go way beyond what he had ever imagined. Through gambling, which was how he began dealing now with the pain he felt inside, he lost everything — his job, his wife, and all his riches, more than \$300,000.

What is the source of this deadly disease? Knowing its origins perhaps will help us.

(c) The Hereditary Nature of Death 2:2

Its source is “the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.” The point here is that we are all “sons of disobedience.” The disease is passed down from family to family. Victims of abuse are consumed with anger toward their abusers, but then they often discover that their abuser himself was abused, and so on back the line. Like marionettes, someone is plucking our strings, making us do their bidding, and this goes on from family to family in an unbroken cycle.

People who are racing down this road, this “Highway to Hell,” as I call it, finally have to face themselves and their pain. They begin looking for an off-ramp, a way of escape. Finally they see an apparent way out, a road sign that says “Religion.” But will religion change their situation? Paul answers this question in verse 3.

(d) Death’s Universal Destiny 2:3

Among them we {Jews} too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

The sign says “Religion,” but it is not an off-ramp; it is a dead-end.

What is Paul saying here? “You Gentiles live in the lusts of the flesh,” says the apostle, “but so do we Jews. Our religion is of no value in this regard.” Paul himself is an excellent example of the dilemma that he illustrates. He lists his qualifications in Philippians 3. He was born of the choice tribe of Benjamin; he had a privileged education, having studied under Gamaliel; and he had a passionate zeal for his religion. Yet with all of those physical blessings, he confesses, he was still ruled by the lusts of the flesh. He was just as helpless as any pagan — even if he had a more polished religious veneer. Remember Jesus’ indictment of the Jews who were convinced that their qualifications (due to their physical birth) were enough to get them into heaven. Said Jesus, “I know that you are Abraham’s offspring; yet you seek to kill me, because My word has no place in you...You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (Jn. 8:37,44a).

So here Paul indicts his own people, saying that the Jews “were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.” There is no case to be made for “us” versus “them.” “We are all,” says the apostle, “whether Jew or Gentile, by nature children of wrath. And our destination is the same: ‘by nature we were children of wrath, even as the rest.’ Our whole natural bent and disposition as Jews was the same as rank pagans. We were destined to fall under the same wrath.” This statement would have had him stoned in most synagogues, yet Paul has no hesitation making it here.

Perhaps I can illustrate. My daughter had to have a blood

transfusion when she was born in 1982. A couple of years ago, we got a letter from the hospital saying that she now needed to be tested for HIV because blood was not screened for the AIDS virus back then. We were very thankful that she tested negative, but sobered by the knowledge that although she was a pure and innocent child, she could very well have contracted the disease through a blood transfusion and suffered the same fate as thousands who have died because of their high-risk behavior.

No, there is no off-ramp on this highway. No matter what kind of car we are driving, a beat-up VW or a brand new BMW, we will all end up at the same place. There is no off-ramp for the walking dead.

But why is the apostle reminding the Ephesian Christians of their depraved condition before they came to faith? When we remember that the economy of Ephesus was based on idolatry, we have the answer. Paul was reminding them so they would not become self-righteous and clothe themselves with a phony religious veneer. When they saw the priestesses doing their seductive dances, and the greedy merchants using idolatry to exploit others, they would be quick to see that this was how they were before they came to Christ. They would have compassion on sinners, knowing that they were not enemies but victims.

It was this kind of humility and appreciation that former slave trader John Newton expressed in the opening verses of his famous hymn, "Amazing Grace":

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound —
That saved a wretch like me!*

This is why Paul reminds the Ephesians of their former ways — so that they would remain humble and freely confess to others what they themselves had been delivered from.

So we have the apostle's word about the human condition: We are "dead in [our] trespasses and sins." Where is God in all of this? you ask. Many people have a mental picture of God as a policeman roaming the streets looking for sinners to pounce on. When he catches them, he slams them against his patrol car, handcuffs them, and throws them in jail. But this doesn't change anything, does it? The problem still remains.

There is no off-ramp on the highway to hell, as we have seen, but there is an overpass.

II. The Overpass of Mercy: "But God" 2:4,5a

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions...

Here Paul comes to the heart of his text. His whole argument lands on the two opening words of verse 4: "But God..." The apostle speaks to three aspects of the Father's heart.

(a) But God Has A Mother's Heart

The word for "mercy" which Paul uses here is the Hebrew word for womb. God has a wealth of mercy toward people who are trapped on the highway to hell. Like a nursing mother, he is easily moved to come to our aid because he knows our helplessness and he is grieved by it. No, God is not a policeman, he is more like a weeping mother.

(b) But God Will Go to Any Length to Save Us

"...because of His great love with which He loved us,..." Like a mother, he will go to any lengths to save the life of a dying child.

(c) But God Is Undaunted By Lack of Response

"...even when we were dead in our transgressions." God knows that we are spiritually comatose, that we cannot respond, but even this does not thwart him. His compassion moves him to change everything that stands between us and him.

Thus when we give testimony to God's grace in our lives, our vulnerability accomplishes two things: a) it exposes our frailties and keeps us humble, and b) it reveals the true face of the Father, a countenance that is radiant with mercy and compassion toward the walking dead.

"But God..." There is the overpass of mercy.

"But," you protest, "God is up there, and we are down here on the highway to hell. How can we get off the highway if there are no off-ramps?" The answer is, God provides a ladder.

II. The Ladder To Heaven 2:5b-10

God's ladder awakens us to four new things: a new life, a new destiny, a new spirit, and a new walk.

(a) To A New Life 2:5b,6

But God...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,

Notice that the three verbs that Paul uses here describe vertical, not horizontal movements. The preposition "with" is found before each verb: made alive *with* Christ, raised *with* Christ, seated *with* Christ. There is a ladder, and the ladder is Christ! Jacob once was on the highway to hell. He sought his own prideful way in life, not caring whether he destroyed people along the way, but in a dream one night he saw a ladder descend from heaven. This was what he needed, a ladder, not a new route to help him flee from his brother Esau. This is what God does to save us, too: He sends a ladder to rescue us.

God did three things in order to accomplish this, says our text. First, he "made us alive together with Christ." We are all familiar with Michelangelo's famous ceiling painting in the Sistine Chapel of God bringing Adam to life by a finger touch. But this touch was not quite intimate enough. God actually breathed life, like a kiss, into Adam in an intimate, self-sacrificial act. In the stories concerning Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32-37), when the prophets restored life to a child, they did not do so with a touch or a word. They placed their mouth on the child's mouth, their eyes against his eyes, their hands on his hands, and then breathed life into the dead body. We can only marvel at the degree of intimacy involved when the Father sent the Holy Spirit to resurrect Jesus and make him alive in the tomb. How awesome it is to think that he must do the same for you and me when he rescues us from the highway to hell.

Secondly, God "raised us up with Him." God raised us to a new place, a new geographical setting (heaven itself), far above all other influences (our lusts and other negative behavior) that were controlling us.

Thirdly, we are "seated with Him." Now we are reigning with Christ, sharing in his rule, so that we might overcome our earthly passions, conquering new ground for the gospel in the process. And we are given new heavenly appetites that transcend the old.

When we finally grasp the enormity of this mercy of God that places us in Christ, then we can sing with John Newton,

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,*

The hour I first believed.

(b) To a New Destiny 2:7

We are no longer destined for wrath.

in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

When I was in Italy as a student, I was surprised to see displayed along the walls in the Academy in Florence some half-finished sculptures by the master sculptor Michelangelo. He believed that the task of the sculptor was to liberate the figure from the block of marble that imprisoned it. J. W. Jansen, in *The History of Art*, comments, "but sometimes the stone refused to give up the essential part of its prisoner, and Michelangelo, defeated, left the work unfinished, as he did with his St. Matthew, whose every gesture seems to record the vain struggle for liberation." Believers are destined to be displayed in a much more exalted place, the Academy of Heaven, and God will beckon the angels to come and study us like some great work of art. When they look at us, however, they will not see us as half-way liberated people. Even though we fight against the chisel, God's kindness is so great he will never stop working on us and with us until we are a finished and glorious work.

(c) With a New Spirit 2:8,9

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, {it is} the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

If we ask what part did we have in all this, Paul replies that our salvation is not accomplished by works, but by faith. And even our faith, says Paul, was a gift of God. When we finally realize this, it brings an end to our arrogance once and for all and we become truly humble. A man said to me last week, "I have a wonderful wife, four lovely children, and 10 healthy grandchildren. In a way I am waiting for the second shoe to drop." He can't get over the fact that he is so blessed by God. But this is nothing compared to the awe we will experience when we get to heaven. It is merely a taste of what is coming.

This, too, was Newton's thought:

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.

We will never cease singing God's praises. Because we were once dead, we will never get over the awesomeness of what God has done for us in Christ.

(d) For a New Walk 2:10

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

Notice here that we are not saved *by* works, but *for* good works, "that we should walk in them." Our text began by saying that we were the walking dead; it ends by describing a transcen-

dent new walk. The midpoint of the text is the heart of God — his mercy which changes everything. We began as the walking dead, and we end as transformed new creations, walking in liberty.

And if you ask what is your role in doing good works, Paul would say that the first priority in our walk as Christians is not to struggle to do good works for God, but to enjoy the privilege of God working in us. We are *his* workmanship, *his* new creation.

The more I observe life, the more amazed I am at the expense and effort that God went to in order to make us a tribute to his beauty and grace. And the greater the task he has in mind for the sinner, the longer he takes. When he chose Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, he put his program back 40 years in order to teach Moses humility. When he wanted David to be king over Israel, he first sent him out to the wilderness to teach him humility. And he sent Paul away to a wilderness for 10 years so that he might be fit for his ministry to the Gentiles.

And here is another amazing thing. When God has done his good work in us, then he prepares good works for us "that we should walk in them." He brings both work and workman together, and in a beautiful moment in time they unite. In my office last week, a married couple who were having difficulties both received Christ at the same moment. I didn't do anything to cause this to happen. This was a good work which God had prepared for me to walk in for a brief moment.

So in our new walk, rather than being tyrannized by evil forces and responding like marionettes, with the world, the flesh, and the devil pulling the strings, God has liberated us so that we become life-givers to others, like the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

My policeman friend ended his testimony last week by saying he had a spiritual blockage in his life because he would not forgive his father. God had to do a work in him, he said, so that he would have to face up to the bitterness that was eating away at him. So God took away his wife, his job, and his riches. Last week, after years of bitter feelings, he telephoned his father and told him he had forgiven him. It will probably take a long time for their relationship to be completely restored, but he has made the beginning that God wanted him to make. Such was the good work that God had prepared beforehand that he should walk in it.

Parents, during this holiday season, don't just tell your children the story of Christmas. Tell them your own story, too. Be vulnerable about your own depravity, and who pulled your strings before you came to Christ. Tell them about your highway to hell. Then tell them of that overpass of mercy where you saw the face of God for the first time; and of the ladder that came down to take you up to heaven; and the work of grace that made you alive; then together you can sing of God's amazing grace.

*Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound —
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.*

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