

Eternal - The faith once delivered...

The Prologue - Who Is Jesus? John 1:1-18

4.25.21

Introduction

In the first eighteen verses of his book, John tells the world who Jesus is. He begins by proclaiming that God the Father is revealed to us in Christ Jesus His Son, and when the Son of God came to earth, He presented to all of humanity what God the Father was like—eternal, personal, and as the source of all life. The word life appears no fewer than thirty-six times in this Gospel along with several other key words, which we will spotlight later. We could say that the word life and its contextual meaning is the foundational theme for the book.

We need only read the first verse of the Bible (Genesis 1:1) to understand the central issue of life, and it centers on the reality of God as not only Creator but as Beginning. If there is a God (and there is), and if that God has spoken in history (and He has), then the most important thing in the world is to find out what He has said. In this prologue of chapter one, John positions himself as that voice of divine knowledge and authority.

The Gospel of John is well embraced by Christian believers and most disciplined followers of the faith are familiar with its themes and memes. However, many who can quote the widely identifiable verses from this unique Gospel have a less-than-

adequate grasp of the importance of its theology and relevance to our present world. We live in a world where followers and disciples of Christ must defend the Christ by how we believe in Him. Do we believe in Jesus as good and righteous man that we can look up to? Was He a great moral teacher that we can learn from? Do we believe in Him as Lord, Savior - the way, the truth, and the life? Was Jesus who He said He was - the Son of God? Those questions do not all provide us with the right or same answers.

There is no uncertainty or ambiguity in John's presentation of Jesus as the Son of God. He starts out where he should start out - with the beginning - creation. John will claim that everything that was ever made was made through him; and without him, nothing has ever been created, and that Jesus was the source of power in the original physical creation and in the spiritual creation by which people are brought to new life in Christ.

Where does John the impetuous and impatient Galilean fisherman, get the authority to speak in the voice of Jesus? From where does he summon the divine knowledge to write as an eyewitness of the creative mysteries of God? Where does he get the literary insight to write in a first-, second-, and third-person context (the divine, the evangelist, and the beloved of Jesus)?

Authorship and Historical Context

The answers to those questions can likely be found if we think of the material in John's Gospel as first of all a sermon that took nearly fifty-five years to write.

Yes, John presents himself as a reliable eyewitness and intermediary between the events themselves and the people who now need to hear them because he was not alone. The Spirit who helped each of the disciples of Jesus bear witness to Him after the resurrection is none other than the Spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit that filled John and the rest on Pentecost is present with him years later as he finally sits and writes with the authority of one being loved, taught, and disciplined by Jesus. He writes this Gospel as one who literally passed the endless baskets of fish to five thousand hungry Galileans, as one who stood right there when Jesus called out Lazarus from his tomb. He writes as one who was only a few feet away when Jesus was arrested in the Garden, and as one who stood three days after the crucifixion in the empty tomb of Jesus remarking about the strangeness of His perfectly folded grave clothing. John writes with the insight and confidence gained from years of contemplation and earned wisdom from being a trusted friend of Jesus. He writes and processes the message and mission the Messiah through the intimate lens of family caretaker for Mary the mother of Jesus. For twenty years after Jesus left until her death John heard and experienced the intimate insights of His Lord from the perspective only a mother could give. Finally, John writes and speaks under the inspiration and revelation of the Holy Spirit. He is uniquely conscious of the continuum of Christian truth; the same faith once delivered to the saints, to be delivered over and over, from generation to generation what Christians have at all times and all places believed.

Text

John 1:1–18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. 15 (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) 16

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Hermeneutic Interpretation of Core Text

[1:1-2] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God.

Some interpreters have translated the opening phrase of this Gospel, "Before there was a beginning, the Word had been." Obviously, the familiar repetition of Genesis 1:1 almost looks as if John wrote a Gospel of two beginnings—a creation account that parallels physical birth and spiritual rebirth. But it is important to notice that we are dealing with two beginnings, not two creations. The central focus of this verse is eternity. Like his heavenly Father, Jesus always was and therefore already existed at the beginning of time.

It is interesting that John should call Jesus the Word rather than some other name to introduce his book—interesting, but not surprising since the Jews often referred to God in such terminology. The doctrine at stake here is the Deity of Christ. Jesus is God, and John wanted to make that point immediately. In fact, this prologue (verses 1–18) begins and ends with a strong statement of this doctrine.

The term Word (Grk; *logos*) [pronounced; lau-gus] is our first keyword and certainly would have been familiar to the Greeks. Their understanding centered on ultimate reason or the rationale of the universe rather than the personal God revealed to Abraham and his descendants. John claimed that the God of creation, the ultimate mind of the universe, had taken on human form; he had become incarnate. But what is meant by 'Word'? The underlying term, *logos*, was used so widely and in such different contexts in first-century Greek that many suggestions as to what it might mean here have been put forward. The Stoics (ancient Greek and Roman philosophers) understood *logos* to be the rational principle by which everything exists, and which is of the essence of the rational human soul. As far as they were concerned, there is no other god than *logos*, and all that exists has sprung from seminal *logoi*, seeds of this *logos*.

The Bible allows no place for atheism and no room for doubt about how God has spoken—through the Word. Before there was a beginning, the Word had been coequal with God throughout all eternity. But what did the apostle mean by with God? The Greek word is *pros* which literally means "toward," implying a face-to-face relationship. John would have neither atheism nor unitarianism (only a singular God). He told us later in this Gospel that the Godhead consists of a trinity, but here in verse 1 we learn first of the plurality of God the Father and God the Son who from the beginning coexisted.

So Jesus, the Word, is both eternal and temporal (personal). Nothing can separate the heavenly Father from his Son. Verse 2 merely emphasizes verse 1. Pastor and author Gary Vanderet put it this way: "John intends that the entire book be read in

light of this verse. The deeds and the words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God."

...Theous en ho logos

[1:3] All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

Unlike the Gospel writers before him, John tells us that Jesus participated in creation and again states his case twice for emphasis. Surely this is a deliberate link with Genesis, and it sets the stage for other New Testament Scriptures which show us Jesus' direct involvement in creation:

Colossians 1:16

"For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him"

Hebrews 1:1-2

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."

Creation is a foundational doctrine of the Christian faith. Virtually every other aspect of theology rests upon our understanding of God as the origin of all life and of the role Jesus Christ, the logos, in creation. John could hardly say it more clearly: without him nothing was made that has been made—everything from subatomic particles to galaxies. Only God who created all things can redeem them. Creation is the foundation stone of the gospel. Christ could not have been created, for he created all things. There was a “historical Jesus,” but this terminology refers only to his thirty-three years of incarnation on earth. His life had no beginning, and it will have no end.

[1:4] In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Here we find the first appearance of our second key word—life. The revelation of the Lamb of God was also the revelation of life. No fewer than thirty-six times in John, we find the word (original Grk; *zoe*). Jesus Christ the Creator provides physical life-*zoe*; Jesus Christ the Redeemer provides spiritual life-*zoe*; and Jesus Christ the Savior provides eternal life-*zoe*. In verse 4 John also introduced our third key word—light. The life becomes the light of men. Notice these terms in contrast to the terms death and darkness. You pick?

In the Word, God’s person and power were revealed to humanity. Here again we see a reference to creation since, in the Genesis account, light was the first evidence of God’s creative work. God is always the source of light and life. Christ the Son, the Creator, provides life and light to humanity. He alone is the life-giver and

the light-bearer. John is getting ready to write new lyrics to an old melody, "With you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light" (Psalm 36:9).

[1:5] The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

In verse 5, John picked up a common first-century theme, the symbols of light and darkness representing dual allusions of both creation and good and evil. Light and darkness are not simply contrasts or opposites; darkness is nothing more than the absence of light. The English word *light* here is transliterated to the authors original Greek as the word *phos* [pronounced; *foes*].

In the allusion of good and evil - all the forces of Satan (darkness) have tried to prevent life and extinguish the light—but they cannot. *The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.* In John's allusion to the creation, 'darkness was over the surface of the deep' (Genesis 1:2) until God said, '*Let there be light*' (Genesis 1:3). At no time other than creation could it more appropriately be said, "*The light shines in the darkness and the darkness gave way to the light.*" While alluding to Genesis, Some hermeneutical studies infer that John also foreshadows the coming of the light of God into the world in the person of the incarnate (God in the flesh) *Logos*-Word. That is only possible if the word *overcome* is translated as *understood*. That translation would say that through Christ the light shone among the Jewish people. He entered their 'darkness', and 'the darkness has not understood it'. As we said, the verb which the NIV translates as '*understood*' (*katelaben*) could also be rendered 'overcame' (NRSV, ESV). This is in line with the way the verb is used elsewhere in John (8:3–4; 12:35). Understood in this way John

(as the evangelist) is foreshadowing the repeated futile attempts of 'the Jews' to literally extinguish the light - Christ.

These first five verses tell us that Jesus came to the world with a message of hope, and he came from heaven where he had (since forever) lived with the Father. This truth is played over and over within John's Gospel. The key words of this passage are like that, especially "life" and "light." The word rendered "understood" in the NIV is translated "seizes" in Mark 9:18 and "overtakes" in John 12:35. ***God sent his light into the world, but mankind did not understand it, could not grasp it. But the world (darkness) will never be able to defeat it.***

[1:9] The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

Through digital technology we have created virtually every kind of artificial light possible for special effects and dynamic impact on both filmed and live stream platforms. But nothing can compare with watching God's sunrise or sunset, or perhaps staring from the blackness of an Arizona desert into the night sky at stars and planets God has made. Jesus is the true light, not an imitation. But what does it mean in verse 9 to say that Jesus, which gives light to every man ... was coming into the world? There are three possible interpretations:

(1) The true light shone on 'every man' without exception before coming into the world (at the incarnation) and continues to do so. The idea is similar to

what systematic theologians call 'general revelation', which strips human beings of their human excuse (as Paul argues),

Romans 1:19-20

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

(2) Alternatively, the true light may be understood to be shining in the context of the incarnation, illuminating not 'every man' without exception but 'every man' without distinction (i.e. not to the Jews only - but to the Gentile as well).

(3) A variation on the second interpretation is an appeal to Augustine's famous illustration of a town with only one teacher. Though not all the citizens are the teacher's students, he is nevertheless the teacher for everyone. So Christ is the only true light God has given to the world, and therefore He is the light for every man. But however theologically true this is, it is not what the text says. It does not speak of the Word serving as (potential) light for every man, but of giving light to every man.

Verse 9 completes the distinct contrast between the Master (Jesus) and the messenger (John the Baptist) of verses 6-8: John the Baptist was a man, Jesus is God; John was a witness, Jesus is the Word; John was a servant, Jesus is the Son. The last phrase of verse 9 (*was coming into the world*) refers to the reality of the incarnation of Jesus, though some have interpreted it to mean the conscience God provides every human being, or even the natural revelation everyone can see. The structure of the verse, however, favors a reference to Christ's birth even though the past tense seems awkward in this context. A major theme of this section is *regeneration*, and verses 6-9 provide its announcement - ***new life was coming into the world.***

[1:10-11] He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Immediately after describing the announcement, John tells us about apathy and rejection toward the message of regeneration (new life). The world (*kosmos*) is another of John's theme words; he used it seventy-seven times. With the device of repetition, John taught incarnation, creation, and rejection all in one verse (verse 10). Depravity and blindness obstructed God's efforts to reach out to his own creation—and still do. As 19th century Scottish theologian and author Dr. Marcus Dods declared, in his book *The Incarnation of the Eternal Word*;

"There He was, the Creator Himself, that mysterious Being who had hitherto kept Himself so hidden and remote while yet so influential and supreme; the wonderful

and unsearchable Source and Fountain out of which had proceeded all that men saw, themselves included—there at last He was 'in the world' He Himself had made, apparent to the eyes of men, and intelligible through their understanding; a real person whom they could know as an individual, whom they could love, who could receive and return their expressions of affection and trust. He was in the world, and the world knew Him not."

In verse 11, the first appearance of the word *own* appears in the neutral gender and the second use of the word *own* is masculine. What significance could such a distinction have for Biblical interpretation? One possibility is that Jesus came to earth, the place he had created, and the second tells us that the people who lived there turned him away. He was not welcomed or accepted.

[1:12-13] But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Early in his book, John established the heart of the gospel, still two chapters away from the most famous passage in the Bible, John 3:16. From the announcement of regeneration followed by rejection the apostle introduces the acceptance of regeneration (new life).

Like most things in life, there is a right way and a wrong way to respond to God. The right way (and the only meaningful way) is to believe the gospel, receive the Savior

and accept new birth as a result. The wrong way somehow links a relationship to God with human qualities such as physical birth, self-determination, or the choice of another person. In John's theological vocabulary, believed and received are synonymous when it comes to the gospel. Patrick Henry once said, "The most cherished possession I wish I could leave you is my faith in Jesus Christ, for with Him and nothing else you can be happy, but without Him and with all else, you'll never be happy."

[1:14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

This may be the most important verse in the Bible on the doctrine of the incarnation (God in the flesh). John went back to verse 1 to pick up one of his favorite themes, the Word. God became human; God showed us his glory; God offered us grace and truth; God literally "tabernacled - lived" among us. Remember the tabernacle in the center of the camp? It represented the place of the law, the abode of God, the source of revelation, the site of sacrifice, and the focus of worship. Now in the new covenant, Jesus provides all these.

And not only was Jesus here, but he demonstrated the glory of the One and Only. Other prophets, including John the Baptist, were sent from God, but the Word came directly from the Father's presence. New Testament and Gospel of John scholar Dr. Gerald Borchert reminds us of some important implications:

"This text makes it absolutely clear that the mission of the Logos was unique in the history of the world. This uniqueness of the Son makes it impossible for Christianity to be a syncretistic (amalgamation or coexist) religion. In the message and mission of Jesus to the world we cannot say 'Jesus and Caesar' or 'Jesus and Buddha,' and so forth. Our confession is Jesus, one faith, one God, one baptism the early Christians suffered and died because they refused to recognize any other pattern than that which was revealed in Jesus Christ."

Finally, we cannot pass lightly over the wonderful phrase, *full of grace and truth*. John used the word grace again in verses 16 and 17, then never mentioned it for the rest of his Gospel! He used truth many times, but here the combination connects with us. Jesus blended two of the most important qualities of the divine nature and displayed them in human personality.

[1:16] For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

In verse 14 John spoke about seeing the glory of the incarnate Word, a glory that was 'full of grace and truth'. Here in 1:16 he speaks not about seeing that grace but of receiving it: From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. Using the first-person plural, 'we', John identifies himself with others, and so we hear the testimony of the first witnesses coming down to us across the centuries. They experienced 'the fullness of his grace' as 'one blessing after another' (Grk; *charis anti charitos*), which literally translated would read "*one blessing replaced by another blessing*." John 1:16 (BKC): The Word made flesh is the source of grace (*charin*), which is the sum total of all the spiritual favors God gives to people. The

words we ... refer to all Christians and include John the author. Because of the fullness of Christ the Son (past-present-future) “grace in place of grace” comes to Christians as waves continue to come to the shore.

[1:17] For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The greatness of the old dispensation was the giving of the Law by God through His servant Moses. No other nation has had such a privilege. But the glory of the Church is the revelation of God’s grace and truth ... through Jesus Christ.

[1:18] No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.

The statement "No one has ever seen God" (see 1 John 4:12) may seem to raise a problem. Did not Isaiah say, “My eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty”? (Isaiah 6:5). God in His essence is invisible (1 Timothy 1:17). He is One “whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16). But John 1:18 means, “no one has ever seen God’s essential nature.” God may be seen in a theophany or anthropomorphism (an interpretation of what is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics) but His inner essence or nature is disclosed only in Jesus.

God the only Son is literally “the unique God” or “the only begotten God” (*monogenēs theos*; *monogenous*, “the one and only” in verse 14). John was probably ending his prologue by returning to the truth stated in verse 1 that the Word is God. Verse 18 is another statement affirming Christ’s deity: He is unique, the one and only God. The Son is at the Father’s side, thus revealing the intimacy of the Father and the Son (the Word was with God, verses 1–2). Furthermore, the Son has made ... known (*exēgēsato*) the Father. The Son is the “*exegete*” of the Father, and as a result of His work the nature of the invisible Father is displayed in the Son.

Key Word Spotlight

Word [logos] The *lógos* here is the historical Christ in a dynamic equation that preserves the idea of a real word not a real illusion; avoiding any mythical personification or identity - Jesus is real and has been since the beginning of time.

1 John 1:1

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Revelation 19:13

The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

These two passages establish the connection between the historical and the eschatological Jesus. John not only presents Jesus as a teacher of the λόγος.

Matthew 11:29

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

So, Christ not only gives the λόγος, but He also is the λόγος. This fact controls the use. The Logos is not just what Jesus said - but the mystery and fullness of God disclosed and completed in Him. This shows that Revelation 19:13 is expressing something integral and essential to the whole Christian message when it says that His name is the Word of God.

Life [zoe] used frequently in the Gospel of John, thirteen times in the epistle of John, and seventeen times the book of Revelation. Jesus said, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through the Son."

Light [phos] Christ gives light to every man. This does not mean universal salvation or general revelation or even inner illumination. Instead, it means that Christ as the Light shines (photizei) on each person either in the hope of salvation, or in the personal illumination of the awesome awareness of his sin and the coming judgment of all sin that is to come.

Fullness [pleroma] Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all represents the Greek “because from his fullness we all received.” The word fullness was a frequent term among the heretical gnostic religions of the first century A.D. It referred to the full nature of the true deity as opposed to that which did not possess the divine nature. Paul took this term and applied it to God’s Son (Colossians 1:19; 2:9; Ephesians 1:23; and 4:13). However, in John’s Gospel this word is used in a nontechnical sense and refers back to the phrase grace and truth in verse 14. Among the translations, only TEV and Mft (“for we have all been receiving grace after grace from his fullness”) appear to make this connection explicit, though a number of commentators call attention to it.

In the last part of this clause, the Greek “we all received” is restructured in some translations to read *He has blessed us all*. Caution... It is dangerous to attempt a literal translation of the clause “*from his fullness have we all received*.” In one language the people understood it to mean “we got what he stuffed himself on”! In some languages a far better rendering would be “because he was so gracious, he has blessed us all” or “because of his great love for us, he has been so good to us all.”

In this context the use of the pronoun “us” is probably best interpreted as inclusive. Undoubtedly John wrote his Gospel to Christians to whom he wished to explain more fully the significance of the "fullness" of the incarnation and ministry of Christ.

Truth Revealed and the Faith Delivered

- Jesus Christ (the Word) is the center and core of the gospel. Christianity is not a philosophy of life - it is life itself. It is the completed faith in the one person who is the creative energy and force of all life - everything that Christians have at all times and all places believed (credo; we believe).
- Like God the Father, God the Son reveals eternality, personality, deity, creativity, life, and light.
- Eternal life and divine light come to those who by faith, become new creations in Christ Jesus.
- The Incarnation is an essential doctrinal term meaning that the fullness of the Spirit of God took on the form of a man in human flesh - that man was Jesus.

Final Thoughts

This timeless passage of foundational truth reveals many things about my faith and belief in who Jesus Christ the Son of God is. Not only myself, but to all humankind

as well. This revelation has not only become my one single hope, but my very life and existence as well. John 1:1-18 has also become to me an uncomfortable reminder of how I have had the knowledge and revelation of the logos and yet too often have made decisions and choices contrary to the very truth and faith I have confessed as not just my only hope, but my life and existence as well. Like you I have read verse 11, "He came unto His own, but His own received Him not" and have thought to myself how could they (the Jews) rebel, reject, and ruin the incarnation of the living logos - the Word that was meant to be their very light, life, and redemption. There He was right before their eyes - the Messiah (God in the flesh), as foretold by their own prophets, and yet they pushed Him away and destroyed their only help and hope. John's Gospel is not a Gospel to exclude or withhold hope and help from those foolish enough to reject and destroy that which is right before them. He is the eternal Word, outside of time - placed inside of time to rescue not only those who receive and welcome but those who have rejected and despised.

Eternal... The Faith Once Delivered

5.9.21 – 5.16.21 – 5.23.21

Spiritual Union and Faith Formation

Ephesians 2:1-10

Introduction

The letter to the Ephesians is ordered and concise, and yet a comprehensive, summary of the Christian good news and its spiritual implications for faith. Nobody can read it without being drawn into various contemplative and worshipful responses. Ephesians is a confrontation with consistency and the righteous order of Christian life. It was John Calvin's favorite letter.

In my lifetime I don't remember a time where good and thoughtful people have ever been more anxious, obsessed, or depressed about the human predicament than they are today. Of course, every generation has its own diseases of its own doing that become too myopic to get them into focus. And every generation breeds new prophets of doom. Nevertheless, the media enable us to grasp the global reach of modern evil, and it is this which makes the moments and messages of the day look so dark and difficult – and truthfully that is how it should be. Darkness will be darkness until there is light, and wrong will be wrong until there is right.

All of this is due (in part) to the volatility of economic uncertainty (population growth, the abuse of natural resources, inflation, unemployment, hunger), and in part to the proliferation of social conflict (racism, tribalism, the class struggle, disintegrating family life) and partly the absence of accepted moral guidelines

(leading to violence, dishonesty and loss of sexual identity and boundaries).

Humankind seems incapable of managing his own affairs or of creating a just, free, humane and tranquil society. Humankind - him/her or itself is adrift. Enter Ephesians...

Against this malevolent background Ephesians 2:1–10 stands out in striking cultural relevance for us today. In this passage we will see “the realist” in its author (the Apostle Paul) as he first measures the depths of depravity within humankind, and then to a hopeful recovery as he lifts us to the heights of a dogmatic insistent unyielding detailing the virtue and righteousness of God. It is this combination of depravity and virtue, of faithlessness and faithfulness, which constitutes the regenerating reality of the Bible. What Paul does for us (the reader) in this passage is remarkable as he paints a stark contrast between what we are by nature and what we can become by the grace and goodness of God.

It is important to set this paragraph in its context. That context is found in Paul’s lead-in prayer of chapter one.

Ephesians 1:15-23

[15] For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, [16] I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, [17] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, [18] having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

[19] and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might [20] that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, [21] far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. [22] And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, [23] which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

We are presented in this prayer with the powerful idea that our introspective eyes might be enlightened by the Holy Spirit enough to know the implications of God's call to us, the wealth of his inheritance which awaits us in heaven - and above all the surpassing greatness of his power which is available for us until such time we are there. Of this power God has given a supreme historical demonstration by raising Christ from the dead and exalting him over all the powers of evil. But he has given further evidential manifestation of it by raising and exalting us with Christ, and so delivering us from the bondage of death and evil. The passage of chapter 2:1-10, then, is really a part of Paul's prayer that they (and we) might know how powerful God is. The first few words of verse 1 emphasize this: **'And you being dead ...'** In the Greek sentence there is no main verb portraying God's action until verse 5 when he writes, **'He made us alive with Christ'**; the English versions bring it forward to verse 1 simply in order to ease the awkward suspense of waiting for it so long. In any case the sequence of thought is clear: **'Jesus Christ was dead, but God raised and exalted him. And you also were dead, but God raised and exalted you with Christ.'**

That first verse sets the tone and nature of the next nine verses that will lead us to a reality check of who we were when Christ found us - and to the unlimited potential of what we will become when our faithfulness is fully formed, united and expressed in Him. So powerful and so relevant are the realities and calls to consistency and faithfulness to the walk of faith and the doctrines of spiritual formation that there was no surprise to me to the opposition from critics and commentators of that last three centuries who have spent mindless wasted hours in their fruitless attempts for notoriety and acknowledgement through theological attack and a scholarly discrediting of the authenticity and authorship of Ephesians. And why not? It fits the current narrative right? Deconstruct the the strongest Biblical literary exposition on the eternal purpose of God being fulfilled in Christ Jesus - first in the individual, and then within the Church of Jesus - the body of Christ.

Authorship and Historical Context

In keeping with the conventional literary custom of his day the author begins by announcing himself. He identifies himself as the apostle Paul. One might think that would count for something. This is not an insignificant point of awareness - it is a critical point of evidence and reliability towards the reader making a decision about who wrote the letter to the Ephesians.

It is important to note that the Pauline authorship of Ephesians was unquestionably accepted from the first century until the beginning of the nineteenth. Why is it, then, that German scholars from the 1820s onward began to question the letter's authenticity, and that this uncertainty about Paul's authorship of Ephesians is

common today? To quote only one example: 'There are many grounds for thinking that it comes neither from his hand nor even from his lifetime.'

Most commentaries draw attention to the letter's distinctive vocabulary and style. They add up the number of words in Ephesians which do not occur in Paul's other letters, and the number of his "go to" words which are not found in Ephesians. His style, they add, is far less impassioned than his other writing. Swiss theology scholar Markus Barth, for instance, has written of the author's 'pleonastic, redundant, verbose diction' and of his 'baroque, bombastic or litany-like style'. Barth's judgment on this is not subjective. Historically, linguistic and stylistic arguments have been proven precarious at best. The logical question should be,

"Why should we expect such an original mind as Paul's or the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit to stay within the confines of a limited vocabulary and an inflexible style?"

Different themes require different words, different seasons, inspirations, and changed circumstances create a changed atmosphere for style and words.

There are two other more noteworthy arguments that have been used to cast doubt on the letter's authenticity, the first historical and the second theological. The historical argument concerns a discrepancy between the Acts account of Paul's longstanding and intimate acquaintance with the Ephesian church and the entirely impersonal and 'hearsay' relationship which the letter expresses. Although his first visit had been brief (Acts 18:19–21), his second lasted three years (Acts 19:1–20:1, 31). During this time, he taught and disciplined them systematically both *'in public and*

from house to house, they came to know Paul well, and at his final parting from the church elders their affection for him had been demonstrative, being accompanied by visible displays of affection and love for one another.

Opposers to Paul's authorship say it is almost shocking to discover that the Ephesian letter contains no personal greetings such as conclude Paul's other letters (no fewer than twenty-six people are mentioned by name in Romans 16). Instead, he addresses his readers only in generic terms, wishing peace to 'the brethren' and grace to 'all who love our Lord Jesus Christ' (6:23–24). He alludes to his own situation as a prisoner (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), but makes no acknowledgment of theirs. He urges them to live in unity and sexual purity, but he gives no hint of any factions or of an immoral offender such as he mentions in 1 Corinthians. He refers in general terms to the craftiness of false teachers (4:14), but he identifies no particular heresy as in Galatians or Colossians. Critics cite these examples to say, that the author of Ephesians gives no written indication that he has a relationship with these people. On the contrary, he has only 'heard' of their faith and love, and they of his stewardship of the gospel (1:15; 3:2–4).

I think we can agree that some of the impersonal character of the letter is a bit surprising - but certainly not evidentiary or conclusive. There is no need to conclude from it that Paul was not its author. Other explanations are possible. Paul may have been addressing a larger group of Asian churches rather than just the Ephesian church, or, as Markus Barth suggests, *'not the whole church in Ephesus but only the members of Gentile origin, people whom he did not know personally and who had been converted and baptized after his final departure from that city'*.

The second argument which is raised against the Paul's authorship of Ephesians is theological. On these objections, commentators make a wide variety of different points. I will narrow them down by saying that most of the arguments of the last couple of centuries are truly *theological dumpster diving*. If you dig long enough you will probably find something interesting - however it is still garbage.

It is emphasized for example, that in Ephesians (and not the letters of unquestioned Pauline authorship), the role of Christ assumes an otherworldly dimension, that the sphere of interest is 'the heavenly places' (a unique expression occurring five times) in which the principalities and powers operate, that the focus of concern is the church, that 'justification' is not mentioned, that 'reconciliation' is more between Jews and Gentiles than between the sinner and God, that salvation is portrayed not as dying with Christ but only as rising with him, and that there is no reference to our Lord's second coming. However, I am of the belief that the context and interpretation of any of these points is nothing more than a comparatively minor shift of emphasis and not evidence of authorship. The reality is that there is no mistaking the essentials of Pauline theology. Even those who deny his authorship are obliged to admit that the letter is filled with the undoubted *line upon line* echoes of the writing of the great apostle Paul.

In addition, there is a sense of distantness in the letter which some readers get. Markus Barth sharply expressed this in his earlier study (1959) entitled *The Broken Wall*. He titled his first chapter '*Paul's Puzzling Epistle*', and presents it as 'a stranger at the door'. What is the 'strangeness' of Ephesians? Barth lists the doctrine of predestination, the emphasis on intellectual enlightenment, 'superstition' (by which he means the references to angels and demons), an 'ecclesiasticism' which

separates the church from the world, and in his teaching about home relationships a 'moralism' which he calls 'patriarchal, authoritarian, and lacking in originality, breadth, boldness and joy. This is how he sums up his initial impression of Ephesians:

'This strange fellow resembles a fatherless and motherless foundling. He uses a tiresome baroque language. He builds upon determinism, suffers from intellectualism, combines faith in Christ with superstitious demonology, promotes a stiff ecclesiasticism, and ends with trite, shallow moralism.'

I have for years referred to the theology of Karl Barth, so when I first discovered work of his son Markus I was intrigued. When reading through some of his hypothesis on Paul and Ephesians I wondered whether it was really Ephesians Dr Markus Barth was describing, or whether we had indeed read the same letter. Eventually it became clear to me that Barth was not even satisfied with his own judgment. He concedes that he may be guilty of a *caricature* (an exaggeration or distortion), then he explains that he wanted to shock his readers into feeling what non-Christians feel when approached with a caricature of the gospel, and finally attempts to balance his former point by depicting 'the charm of acquaintance' which people experience who become familiar and friendly with the Ephesians letter. The letter connects itself and its author to us, he suggests, by three characteristics.

First, Ephesians is intercession. More than any other New Testament epistle, it 'has the character and form of prayer'. When somebody argues with us, he may or may not persuade us; but when he prays for us, his relation to us changes. 'So it is with

the stranger at the door. Ephesians has gained a right to enter because its readers have a place in the intercession of the author.'

Secondly, Ephesians is affirmation. It is neither apologetics, nor polemics. Instead, it is filled with 'bold' and even 'jubilant' affirmations about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. 'Ephesians makes itself welcome and is a charming document just because it dares to let shine nothing else but God's love and election, Christ's death and resurrection, and the Spirit's might and work among men.'

Thirdly, Ephesians is evangelism. In his survey of the letter's contents Markus Barth emphasizes its 'bold assertions' about God's saving purpose and action (chapters 1 and 2), about 'God's ongoing work in his self-manifestation to and through the church' (chapters 3 and 4), and about 'the bold and joyful ambassadorship of the Christians in the world' (chapters 5 and 6). All this, he says, gives Ephesians 'peculiar significance for all concerned with the evangelistic tasks of the church today'.

So, what then is the general consensus in scholarly circles regarding the authorship of Ephesians? Honestly, many are content to sit on the fence. They would agree with the historian and author of *Paul's Letters from Prison*, J. H. Houlden; that there is '*no consensus of expert opinion*', for '*argument answers argument without clear outcome*'.

For me the point of this is pointless. I too, am an educated man... Pick a side, don't be lukewarm - and certainly use your education and knowledge to be courageous and not fearful. Spiritual leaders must have the courage to make a decision, and while making it remember that it might be wise to choose the Word of God (the

faith once delivered) above the notoriously suspicious words and opinions of men. This is so that one might be free to receive the genuine revelation of truth that God has intended to use to fill the soul and lift the spirit. Having done that, one must use education and scholarly insight to enlighten and teach others how to access and interpret the truth they are seeking.

In the last thirty years many, many scholars are coming back to the traditional view of Paul's authorship. I highly respect and recommend theologian and author (*Introducing New Testament Theology, Interpreting the Parables, The Gospel According to John*) A. M. Hunter, who picked a side thirty years ago and said publicly, '*the burden of proof lies with those who deny Paul's authorship*'. Markus Barth before his death in 1994, walked back many of his earlier claims and used the same expression and applies the maxim '*innocent until proven guilty*'. As I said, I find even these judgments too weak. They do not seem to give sufficient weight to either the external or the internal evidence.

Externally, there is the impressive witness of the universal church for eighteen centuries, which should carry a great weight, and not be taken lightly.

Internally, the letter not only claims to be written by the apostle Paul throughout, but its theme of the union of Jews and Gentiles by God's gracious reconciling work through Christ is entirely appropriate to what we learn elsewhere about the ministry of Paul apostle to the Gentiles.

I do not think that the author of the *The Expositors Bible*, George G. Findlay was exaggerating when he wrote that modern skepticism about Paul's authorship of

Ephesians will in future come to be regarded as '*one of ... the curiosities of a hypercritical age*'. The absence of any satisfactory alternative is rightly emphasized by British bible scholar Frederick Bruce (*New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*) said,

'The man who could write Ephesians must have been the apostle's equal, if not his superior, in mental stature and spiritual insight ... Of such a second Paul early Christian history has no knowledge.'

That is why it is a comfort and peace for me to remain tethered to the text:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God."

Paul claims the same title which Jesus had given to the Twelve, and whose formal training in both Old Testament and Rabbinic Judaism designated somebody specially chosen, called and sent to teach with authority. Don't forget Paul did not volunteer for this ministry (he surrendered to it), nor had the church appointed him. On the contrary, his apostleship derived from the will of God and from the choice and commission of Jesus Christ. If this is true, and I believe that it is, then we must listen to the message of Ephesians with appropriate attention and humility due to someone who was chosen, called, and sent by God. We should regard its Paul the author not as a private individual who is ventilating his personal opinions, nor as a gifted but fallible human teacher, nor even as the church's greatest missionary hero. But as '*an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*.' Time to stop *dumpster diving* and begin to listen to the voice of God as revealed through His hand-picked teacher whose authority is the same authority of Jesus Christ himself,

in whose name and by whose inspiration he writes. The letter of Ephesians reveals itself as the work of the Holy Spirit as clearly as the voice of God hovered over the face of the waters.

Text

Ephesians 2:1-10

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—[3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. [4] But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—[6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [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. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Hermeneutic Interpretation of Core Text

[2:1-3] And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Before we look in detail at this devastating description of the human condition apart from God, we need to be clear that it is a description of everybody. Paul is not giving us a portrait of some particularly decadent tribe or degraded segment of society, or even of the extremely corrupt and debased paganism of his own day. No, this is the biblical diagnosis of fallen man in fallen society everywhere. True, Paul begins with an emphatic you, indicating in the first place his Gentile readers in Asia Minor, but he quickly goes on to write (verse 3a) that we all once lived in the same way (thus adding himself and his fellow Jews), and he concludes with a reference to the rest of mankind (verse 3b). Here then is the apostle's estimate of everyman without God, of the universal human condition. It is a condensation into three verses of the first three chapters of Romans, in which he argues his case for the sin and guilt first of pagans, then of Jews, and so of all mankind. Here he singles out three appalling truths about unredeemed human beings, which included ourselves until God had mercy on us.

a. Because of our sin we were dead to Him.

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked (verses 1–2a). The death to which Paul

refers is not a figure of speech, as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, *'This my son was dead'*; it is the reality of everybody's spiritual condition outside Christ. And it is traced to their trespasses and sins. These two words seem to have been carefully chosen to give a comprehensive account of human evil. A 'trespass' (*paraptōma*) is a false step, involving either the crossing of a known boundary or a deviation from the right path. A 'sin' (*hamartia*), however, means rather a missing of the mark, a falling short of a standard.

Together the two words cover the positive and negative, or active and passive, aspects of human wrongdoing, that is to say, our sins of commission and of omission. Before God we are both rebels and failures. As a result, we are 'dead' or 'alienated from the life of God' (4:18).

For true life, 'eternal life', is fellowship with the living God, and spiritual death is the separation from him which sin inevitably brings: **'Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that he does not hear.'**

This biblical statement about the 'deadness' of non-Christian people causes skepticism for many because it contradicts the facts of everyday experience. Tough to interpret this passage without identifying and understanding the paradox being used. There are millions of people who make no Christian profession whatever, who even openly repudiate Jesus Christ, appear to be very much alive - famous athletes, brilliant scholars, or talented actors or musicians. There is not much secular credibility to saying these people are dead, if Christ has not saved them. are dead? In the spiritual realm of

temporal existence to eternal being it is real and it matters. Outside of Christ - we are dead, and there is no life. The appearance of having everything but the reality of having nothing - blind to the glory of Jesus Christ, and deaf to the voice of the Holy Spirit. They are as unresponsive to him as a corpse. So, we should not hesitate to acknowledge that a life without God is a living death (dead man walking). To affirm this paradox is to become aware of the basic tragedy of fallen human existence - people who were created by God and for God should not be living without God.

b. Our minds and bodies were codependent enablers to our sin.

Paul is not content to say simply that we once walked in trespasses and sins. The expression is a *Hebraism*, indicating our former behavior or lifestyle. But a 'walk' suggests (at least to western minds) a pleasant promenade in the countryside, with leisured freedom to enjoy the beauties of our surroundings. Very different, however, was our former 'walk in trespasses and sins'. There was no true freedom there, but rather a fearful bondage to forces over which we had no control. What were they? If behind death lies sin, what lies behind the sin that holds us in such captivity? Paul's answer, when put into scriptural terminology, is '*the world, the flesh and the devil*'. He refers to these three influences as that which controlled and directed our former pre-Christian existence.

First, he describes us as following the course of this ***world***. The Greek phrase is 'according the age of this world' [*stochiea*]. It brings together the two

concepts of 'this age' of evil and darkness (in contrast to 'the age to come' which Jesus introduced) and of 'this world', society organized without reference to God or—as we might say—secularism (in contrast to God's kingdom, which is his new society under his rule). So, both words 'age' and 'world' express a whole social value-system which is in hostile contradiction to God. It controls non-Christian society and holds people in moral and emotional captivity. Wherever human beings are being dehumanized—by political oppression or bureaucratic tyranny, by an outlook that is secular (repudiating God), amoral (repudiating absolutes) or materialistic (glorifying the consumer market), by poverty, hunger or unemployment, by racial discrimination, or by any form of injustice—there we can detect the sub-human values of 'this age' and 'this world'. Their influence is pervasive. People tend not to have a mind of their own, but to surrender to the cultural trends and impulses of the day. This not cultural freedom - it is cultural bondage. We were all the same until Jesus liberated us.

The second captivity was to ***the devil***, who is here named the prince of the power of the air or in some translations *'the ruler of the kingdom of the air'*. The original Greek for 'air' could be translated *'foggy atmosphere'*, indicating the darkness which the devil prefers to light. But the whole phrase need mean no more than that he has command of those 'principalities and powers' already mentioned, who operate in the unseen world. It is not good optics in our current Church environment to believe either in an actual devil or in personal demonic intelligences under his command. But there is no obvious reason why church fashion should be the director of theology,

whereas the plain teaching of Jesus and his apostles (not to mention the church of the subsequent centuries) endorsed their malevolent existence.

A further phrase is the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Since the words the spirit are in the genitive, they are not in opposition to the prince (accusative). We must rather understand that 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air' is also 'the ruler of the spirit which works in disobedient people'. 'Spirit' then becomes an impersonal force or mood which is actively at work in non-Christian people. Since Scripture identifies the devil not only as the source of temptations to sin, but also as a 'lion' and a 'murderer', we may safely trace all evil, error and violence back to him in the end. When he and the mood he inspires are said to be at work in human beings, the verb (*energeō*) is the same as that used of God's power (1:20) which raised Jesus from the dead. Only that divine energy or action could have rescued us from the devil.

The third influence which holds us in bondage is the *passions of our flesh* (verse 3a), where 'flesh' means not the living fabric which covers our skeletal system but our fallen, self-centered human nature - the desires of body and mind. This is particularly important because it shows the mistake of equating 'the passions of the flesh' with what is commonly called 'the sins of the flesh'. Some clarifications are needed here.

First, there is nothing wrong with natural bodily desires, whether for food, sleep or sex. God has made the human body that way. It is only when the human appetite for food becomes gluttony, for sleep becomes sloth and for

sex objectifying lust, that natural desires have been perverted into sinful desires.

Secondly, 'the passions of the flesh' include the wrong desires of the mind as well as of the body, namely such sins as *prideful intellectualism, delusional ambition, rejection of known truth, and hostile or vengeful thoughts*. Indeed, according to Paul's exposition in Philippians 3:3–6, '*the flesh*' covers all forms of self-confidence, even pride of ancestry, parentage, race, religion and righteousness. Wherever 'self' rears its ugly head against God or man, there is what scripture calls 'the flesh'. Frederick Bruce comments, *it 'can manifest itself in respectable forms as well as in the disreputable pursuits of first-century paganism'*. The natural and spiritual reality is this - our self-centeredness is a horrible bondage. So then, before Jesus Christ set us free, we were subject to oppressive influences from both within and without. Outside was 'the world' (the prevailing secular culture); inside was 'the flesh' (our fallen nature twisted of self-centeredness); and beyond both, actively working through both, was that evil spirit, the devil, 'the ruler of the kingdom of darkness', who held us in captivity. Not that we can now conveniently shift all the blame for our slavery on to 'the world, the flesh and the devil', and accept no responsibility for it ourselves. On the contrary, it is significant that in these verses 'you' and 'we' are not identified with these forces but distinguished from them, although enslaved by them. We ourselves, however, are termed sons of disobedience (verse 2b), that is, 'God's rebel subjects' (NEB). We had rebelled, knowingly and voluntarily, against the loving authority of God and so had fallen under the dominion of Satan.

c. We were faced with the consequences of the evil of our own doing and condemned.

Paul did not gloss quickly his description of our pre-Christian state. He has one more unpleasant truth to tell us about ourselves. Not only were we dead and enslaved, he says, but we were also condemned: we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (verse 3b). There is not an expression in Ephesians which has provoked more conflict and controversy than this. Some commentaries make little or no attempt to understand, let alone defend, it; it is dismissed as untenable today. There are three noteworthy causes for the hostility. The words *wrath – children – by nature*. Let's look to what Paul meant in using them.

First, the *wrath* [*hē orgē*] of God. God's wrath is not like man's. It is not bad temper, not spite, not malice, not animosity, or revenge. It is never arbitrary, since it is the divine reaction to only one situation - evil. Because the wrath of God toward evil is not subject to mood or impulse, it is entirely predictable and should be expected. Yet this wrath is personal in the sense that the wrath that judges and the grace that saves are both personal. They are the wrath and the grace of God. They both are divine responses from a sovereign God - one towards evil the other towards the human condition of His Creation.

So, what is his wrath if it is neither an arbitrary reaction nor an impersonal process? It is God's inherent hostility to evil, His nature of refusal to

compromise with it, and His unchanging, unmovable, response to condemn it. Further, his wrath is not incompatible with his love – it is characteristic of it. The contrast between verses 3 and 4 is notable: *we were by nature children of wrath. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us.* Paul response - move from the wrath of God to the mercy and love of God without any sense of embarrassment or anomaly. He is able to hold them together in his mind because he believed in his heart that they were held together in God's character. We need (in context), to be more grateful to God for his wrath, and to worship Him because his righteousness is perfect and He always reacts to evil in the same unchanging, predictable, uncompromising way. Without the moral constancy of God we would not know peace.

The second problem people find is in the phrase children of wrath. For the words conjure up a picture of little children, even newborn babies, as under God's wrath, and understandably people do not like what they see in their minds. But it is safe to say that there is no allusion here to little children. The expression is another Hebraism, like 'sons of disobedience' in verse 2, and refers to people of all ages. NEB helpfully substitutes the statement: 'we lay under the dreadful judgment of God'.

The third problem is in the adverbial clause by nature. In what sense is it 'by nature' that we were the objects of God's wrath and judgment? To begin with, we can surely all agree that Paul draws a deliberate contrast between what we were 'by nature' (*phusei*, verse 3) and what we have become 'by grace' (*chariti*, verse 5). It is a contrast between the past and the present, between

what we were when left to ourselves and what we have become because God intervened on our behalf, and so between judgment and salvation: *'By nature we were under God's wrath, by grace we have been saved.'* That much is clear, and uncontroversial.

But *phusei*, 'by nature', seems to describe more than our 'natural' condition, when left to ourselves. It seems also to point to the origin of our condition 'as members of a fallen race', and so to raise difficult questions about our genetic inheritance, and therefore about our moral responsibility. Is Paul's phrase shorthand for something longer such as that by birth we have a natural tendency to sin, so therefore we do sin, and that our sin brings us under the judgment of God? Or is he saying that our very being as humans is from birth under God's judgment?

Big question: *"does our inherited human nature itself deserve God's wrath and judgment"*? This is what Paul seems to be teaching here; how can we understand him?

Probably the best commentary is his own - found in Romans. Just as these verses are a condensed version of Romans 1-3, so the expression *'by nature children of wrath'* is a summary of Romans 5:12-14. His argument there that 'death spread to all men because all men sinned' is not that all inherited a sinful nature which led them to sin and so to die, but that 'all men sinned' in and with Adam. The Old Testament has a strong sense of the solidarity of the human race. It speaks of the next generation as being already 'in the loins' of the present generation, a truth which modern genetics may be said to

underline. Paul is saying, then, that we cannot make Adam our scapegoat and blame him for our sin, guilt and condemnation. For we were ourselves in Adam. It may truly be said that we sinned in Adam, and that in and with him we incurred guilt and died. Is it not in this sense that we may be described as 'by nature' sinners and subject to God's just judgment? The great majority of Protestant theologians have always wanted to add (even if tentatively) that they believe God's grace and Christ's atonement cover the years of childhood before the age of responsibility, and those in the reformed tradition have drawn attention to the biblical evidence that children with Christian parents are born within the covering of the covenant. Yet even these important qualifications do not alter the facts of our inherited sin and guilt, or of the judgment we deserve. Outside Christ man is dead because of trespasses and sins, enslaved by the world, the flesh and the devil, and condemned under the wrath of God.

It is a failure to recognize this gravity of the human condition which explains people's naive faith in the remedies of humankind. Biblical literacy is needed, desired, and required to understand this. Yet it will take more than education and learning to rescue us from jaws of spiritual death and into to the arms of eternal life - we need Jesus. From the moment we can find Him – we need Him, and He alone is enough.

[2:4] But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,

Such was the plight of all mankind. But God broke in. We have what John Stott speaks of as 'a mighty adversative'. Set against 'the desperate condition of fallen mankind' we have 'the gracious initiative and sovereign action of God'. The subject of the verb has waited from the beginning of the chapter to this point. The verb waits till the next verse, till Paul in his usual manner (cf. 1:17; 3:9, 15–16), having mentioned the name of God, speaks in glowing terms of his goodness and grace. He is not only merciful, showing his pity to those who are totally unworthy and undeserving; he is rich in mercy (see on 1:7). That mercy proceeds from love, the great love with which he loved us. There is longing in the heart of God for humanity—the us now means Jews and Gentiles alike—to be restored to the highest and best that he had planned for them (cf. John 3:16; 1 John 4:9–10); and so he has shown himself full of mercy, and has acted in grace towards them.

[2:5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

But before the apostle describes the action of the love of God, he resumes the object and emphasizes once again our human condition and desperate need. His love reached down to us even when we were dead through our trespasses (cf. Rom. 5:6, 8), and he made us alive together with Christ. We have seen that new life, and nothing less, was needed. By his death and resurrection, he did no less than bring 'life and immortality to light' (2 Timothy 1:10). For in his death he suffered for sin, and removed the barrier to fellowship with God that sin caused, and by his resurrection he showed his triumph over death, physical and spiritual. The forgiveness of sins means the establishment of a right relationship with God and that means new life (Colossians 2:13). Because Christ was raised from the dead,

men and women are raised from being dead in sins, and have new life with Christ and in Christ (Romans 6:4–8; 8:11; 2 Corinthians 4:14). The word *together*, here and twice in the next verse, is given in the Greek by adding the prepositional prefix [*syn*] to the verb. Often Paul used it to express a union with Christ (Romans 6:6, 8; Colossians 2:12; 2 Timothy 2:11–12), and in this case it led him apparently to coin a new word to express the new revelation. The preposition here may also carry the hint of the fact that from whatever racial or national background people have come, they are brought into this new life in Christ in fellowship together, a theme that is developed fully in the next section.

This new life, as the exposition of it has shown, can also be described as salvation from sin, and Paul cannot help but add here (though he waits till later to develop it) his favorite summing up of the gospel, by grace you have been saved. For the human situation could be described not only in terms of spiritual death, but also as enslavement and inescapable entanglement in the coils of sin. From that bondage Christ brought liberation (Romans 6:12–23). The precise form of words here stresses two things. As consistently emphasized by Paul, salvation is entirely of his grace, his free, undeserved favor to mankind. Then also this salvation is presented as an accomplished fact. There are ways in which the New Testament can speak of salvation as a present (1 Corinthians 1:18; 15:2; 2 Corinthians 2:15) or a future experience (Romans 5:9–10), since it means deliverance from the power of sin now, and in the end it will mean deliverance from the very presence of sin. But as deliverance from the penalty of sin, as free forgiveness, salvation is described by the use of the perfect tense, expressing as it does a completed action ‘continuous and permanent’ in its results.

[2:6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

The recital of the work of God's grace in Christ continues in lyrical terms. Some have suspected a liturgical origin for much in these verses; at least praise and prayer in this letter are often in terms appropriate to liturgy. In 1:20 we read of the declaration of the Father's power, not only in raising Christ from the dead, but also in the fact that he 'made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places'. So, as this chapter speaks of his quickening us together with Christ, it goes on to say that he raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. In 1:3 the apostle has said that God has 'blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places'. Now he says more specifically that our life has come to be there, enthroned with Christ. If this is not explicitly stated elsewhere in the Pauline letters, the meaning is implicit in such a passage as Colossians 3:1-3. Humanity, by virtue of Christ's conquest of sin and death and by his exaltation, is lifted 'from the deepest hell to heaven itself' (Calvin). Citizenship is now in heaven (Philippians 3:20); and there, and not under the limits imposed by the world, nor in conformity to its standards (Romans 12:2), true life is found.

[2:7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

The purpose of God for his church, as Paul came to understand it, reaches beyond itself, beyond the salvation, the enlightenment and the re-creation of individuals, beyond its unity and fellowship, beyond even its witness to the world. The church is to be the exhibition to the whole creation of the wisdom and love and grace of God

in Christ. (The Greek verb used, *endeiknymi*, means *display* or *show* rather than simply 'make known', as its use in such passages as Romans 2:15 and Titus 3:2 indicates.) This has been expressed in part in 1:6, 12 and 14 where the spiritual blessings that are offered in Christ were spoken of as given and received 'to the praise of his glorious grace'. It will be expressed more specifically in 3:9–10. Here the purpose of our being raised to new life in Christ, and lifted with him to a heavenly citizenship, is said to be that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Sometimes *the coming ages* have been understood to refer to successive stages or periods of this present world order. The language, though this phrase is not paralleled precisely in the New Testament, is against this. (Ephesians 1:21 and Matthew 12:32; Mark 10:30.) Paul never saw this world order extending this far (as to include a time and age such as ours). It is true that in his later letters he placed less stress on the immediacy of Christ's coming again, perhaps as he saw the enormity of the unfinished task, but he never exchanged the sense of urgency for a concept of centuries between himself and the Lord's coming, nor did he vary his emphasis on the need for readiness to meet the Lord at any time (see Philippians 1:10; 2:16; 3:20; 4:5 and Colossians 3:4).

The apostle's vision of the function of the church in the purpose of God has been lifted beyond this present order: as 'in the limitless future, as age succeeds age, the crowning display of God's grace will ever be His kindness to His redeemed people ... F.F. Bruce (Theologian, Author)

[2:8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

Now the parenthetical statement made in verse 5 is repeated, expanded and expounded. Why can the life of heaven be possessed here and now? How is there such an exhibition of the love of God from which the whole creation of God can learn and wonder? Because by grace you have been saved. This salvation is God's work entirely, the bestowal of his infinite love. The human part in receiving it can be described simply by the words through faith (Romans 3:22, 25; Galatians 2:16; 1 Peter 1:5). And this faith is defined best as a turning to God with a sense of need and weakness and emptiness and a willingness to receive what he offers, to receive the Lord himself (John 1:12).

Anxious to emphasize with crystal clarity the nature of this faith and the nature of grace, Paul, by his qualifying phrases in this verse and the next, excludes the possibility of anyone obtaining this salvation by any merit or self-effort. He adds to his statement of salvation by grace through faith the words and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God. Sometimes this has been taken to refer to faith itself being only possible by God's gift. If we take it this way, we would need to regard the second part of verse 8 as a parenthesis, since verse 9 must refer to the salvation and not to faith. It seems better, however, especially in the light of the parallelism between verse 8 and verse 9 (not your own doing ... 'not because of works') to take all the qualifying clauses as simply emphasizing salvation by grace. What the apostle wants to say is that the whole initiative and every aspect of the making available of this salvation is God's. 'God's is the gift' is the rendering that shows best the emphasis of the word order in the Greek. 'Let a man be abandoned by God, and

he is absolutely hopeless. It is the voice of God that arouses, that awakens, that causes a man to think and enquire; it is the power of God that gives strength to act; it is the same power which makes provision for the need of the new life.

[2:9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Then, secondly, we are taken back to the terminology of Romans and Galatians—not because of works—and to what was a vital question for the Jews of Paul's day because of their exaltation of the law. But such is the human heart, and so great is the temptation of people in every age and race to deceive themselves into thinking that their lives are good enough for God, that the reminder of this verse is needed still. If this salvation is of God's grace and received simply through faith, it is not because of works (Romans 3:20, 28; 4:1–5; Galatians 2:16; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5). For 'all have sinned' (Romans 3:23), and suffer sin's consequences, exclusion from life in fellowship with God. This means furthermore that no-one can boast before God, since all are admitted on the grounds of grace. 'Some room', says Calvin, 'must always remain for man's boasting, so long as, independently of grace, merits are of any avail.' But merits have no place. God will allow no-one to boast (Romans 3:27). The words here may in fact imply that this was a part of God's purpose and the reason for his bringing salvation as he did, to exclude human pride (Judges 7:2). Or perhaps we should take it simply as a result, 'There is nothing for anyone to boast of' (neb). In either case it is made clear that the only right attitude, the only possible attitude for sinful men and women before their Maker and their Judge is penitence and humble dependence. Their only pride can be in the cross by which they find salvation (Galatians 6:14) and the Savior who suffered there (1 Corinthians 1:29–31).

[2:10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The work of God in Christ has been described as the gift of new life, and as the gift of salvation. Now it is shown further that people of themselves could not accomplish it by its being described as God's new creation. We, in this new life, this new nature that we have received, are his workmanship. The Greek again gains emphasis by the word order, as it makes **his** stand first in the sentence. The noun used (*poiēma*) is from a different root to the 'works' (*ergon*) of the previous verse, and is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in Romans 1:20, where it is used of the works of God's first creation. Humanity was his making at the first, and now, because that work of his was spoilt by sin, there is a new divine act of creation. For 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17; see also Ephesians 4:24; Galatians 6:15; Colossians 3:10). In Christ Jesus—the phrase comes for the third time in five verses: *in faith-union with him, those whose lives were marred and ruined by failure and sin are made new*.

'Works' have been excluded as a means of amassing merit and gaining favor with God. The gulf between God and sinful humanity must be bridged by God's action. The new life in fellowship with God must be God's creation and cannot be our work. Nonetheless, the essential quality of the new life is good works. The preposition here shows that more is involved than saying that good works were the purpose of the new life, or that people were redeemed in order to be a people 'zealous for good deeds' (Titus 2:14; Colossians 1:10); rather it is that good works are 'involved' in the new life 'as an inseparable condition' (Abbott). His new creation must be

spoken of as being 'in true righteousness and holiness' (Ephesians 4:24). It is of such a kind that it must and will express itself in this way.

To demonstrate this still further as being the divine purpose Paul adds concerning such good works that God has prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. This does not of necessity mean that there are particular good works that are God's purpose for us. There can be no objection to such a concept, if it is reckoned that the foreknowledge of an almighty and omniscient God is not opposed to his gift of free will. But probably it is rather the whole course of life that is on view here. The nature and character of the works and the direction of the Christian's daily walk (see on 2:2) are predetermined. This then corresponds closely with 1:4 which describes the end and goal of election as 'that we should be holy and blameless before him'. R. W. Dale puts it:

'As the branch is created in the vine, we are created in Christ; as the fruits of the branch are predetermined by the laws of that life which it receives from the vine, so our "good works" which are the result of our union with Christ, are predetermined by the laws of the life of Christ which is our life ...'

Key Word Spotlight

Truth Revealed and The Faith Delivered

- God's grace gives us life and unites us with him and with people from whom we are alienated.
- We were all once spiritually dead and were objects of God's wrath.

- Because of God's rich mercy, he has provided salvation for us by grace through faith, not through our good works, so that we cannot claim credit for that which belongs to Him.