December 16/17, 2023

Redemption

Christmas in Context Series

Ephesians 2:1-10

Pastor Jeff Petersen

Several years ago, a college student in Indiana shared her story with her church. It was heartbreaking. She was about the age of thirteen when her world began to unravel. At that time, her family was her father and her mother, her brother and a foster sister who was living with them. But at that point, it came out that her foster sister was pregnant, and then it was discovered that the cause of her pregnancy was her father himself. The girl was removed from her home, and a restraining order was put in place to protect her from her father. Her entire world was turned upside down. The story only got worse later, when she discovered that her father was tried, sentenced, and sent to prison for a crime he did not commit. For she later discovered that it was actually her brother and her foster sister who had entered into an inappropriate relationship with each other, and then had conspired together to cover up what they had done. And she hated her brother.

You know when we hear stories like that, almost every person, universally, has a reaction. It's almost visceral. We hear that and we are heartbroken. We're angry. We know that it is so, so wrong. And in that moment, we realize that something is really, really broken in our world. But the challenge for most of us is to not simply think that something out there is broken, but to actually realize that the same source, the same root of brokenness, actually lives right in here. (Points to his heart.) That is what Ryan was telling us last week. That's right where we pick up this week. Let's turn together in our Bibles to Ephesians, Chapter 2.

Today, we are completing our Advent series. And this year, we are seeking together to understand why Christmas actually matters, by looking at it in the broader context of the overarching story of humanity. And two weeks ago, Bryan took us back to the beautiful beginning and reminded us that in creation, God's design was good. In fact, not only was God's beautiful, created world good, but people made in His image, were called by God Himself, "*very good'*. Something was very, very right with God's good design. But today, it is so very easy to see that something is very, very wrong in our world, and even sometimes in us. That's what Paul talked about last week, as we moved from the Creation to the Fall. And it's like there was a black tar of division—destruction and death—that was splashed all across the world and all across humanity. And today, the beauty of humanity and even the beauty of God's creation is often marred and masked by the stain of sin and death. That's where we found ourselves last week in Romans 1, and that's where we find ourselves again today in Ephesians 2, verse 1:

> **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. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and we were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.**
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> (*NASB, Ephesians 2:1-3)

In Ephesians chapter one, Paul explains the wondrous plan of God. But in Ephesians chapter two, he sets that plan in the context of our fallen world. And he tells us of four dreadful realities for people, consequences of the fall. First, in verse 1, he says that **you were dead in trespasses and sins,** literally spiritually dead, separated from God and His life and goodness, because of our sin.

Then second, in verse 2 he says, **in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world.** In other words, you lived and walked according to this world, which is actually followership of the evil one himself. That's what verse two means.

Third, in verse 3, all of us. **Among them we all formerly lived in the lust of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind.**

And finally, four, from verse 3, we are, or at least **we were by nature, *deserving of, and under God's wrath***. That is hard to hear. And you know, what's interesting is, it is so easy to see sin in others, but sometimes it is so easy to overlook in us. And when we do, it's hard to even imagine Ephesians 2:1-3 as being in any way applicable to us. But it is, or at least it was. In Romans chapter one last week, Ryan talked about the results of the Fall. And Romans one ends with quite a list of what the ruined heart looks like. And it is easy to look at the things that we consider really bad, like the story that I told at the beginning. But in the eyes of God, all sin is really bad, because it is contrary to His good nature, His good design, His good purpose, and it leads to division, destruction, and death.

And so when we read in Ephesians 2:3, **indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind,** it can be easy to think that if we weren't or aren't engaging in some gross immorality, this doesn't apply to us. But what about gossip? Or slander, or strife? What about deceit, envy, greed? What about simply being unloving, unmerciful? Those are all descriptors that Paul uses in Romans chapter one. To most of us, it is the sin in the life of the brother at the story I told in the beginning, that is deserving of wrath. But for most of us, the hatred toward her brother in the life of that girl, well, that is simply understandable and acceptable. And make no mistake. It is absolutely understandable. But she herself said that it, too, was a cancer in her family, and was ruining her soul.

She went on, in telling the story, to describe the needed journey of forgiveness, and the release of hatred. And she described the healing act that began to set her heart free. You know, her brother continued to make terrible decisions, so much so that he ended up in prison. And in an amazing twist of irony, her father ended up being transferred to the same prison where her brother was, and he asked if he could meet with his son. When the girl heard about this, she had no idea how her father would react when he came face to face with the very one who had literally destroyed his life and his family. Would he punch him in the face? Would he yell at him? She had no idea how he would respond. When the father saw his son, he opened his arms and said, "I love you." And this girl was blown away by this act from her father. She said she had been praying that God would change her brother, but through what her father did, she realized she also needed to pray that God would change her.

The truth is, at least at times, every single one of us in this room is unloving. We are sometimes unmerciful. We can be boastful and prideful; we can be selfish and conceited and deceitful. We

are people created in the image of God, capable of such beautiful acts of love and sacrifice. But we are also people, the same people—fallen people—who are at times hurtful, unkind, and even cruel. And according to Scripture, either we are, or we were dead in transgressions and sins, and, by God's standard, all sin is deserving of wrath.

Friends, this is the context of Christmas. God, in all His goodness, created a perfect world in which everyone and everything came together for mutual flourishing, for shalom. That was God's design. That was God's desire. But mankind chose in the garden, and has every day since, to go our own way, to turn our back on God, and to seek to be our own god. And today, all around us are people who are saying, "Ahh, no thanks. I don't need God." And if you and I are actually honest with ourselves, then we will admit that we often live as though we would rather be in charge and handle things on our own as well. And what a mess we've made. Just look around. Just look at our world. War, anger, hatred, division. Read a thread on social media! See mocking, hurtful, vengeful, degrading comments, divided people throwing stones, figuratively, and sometimes in some cases, bullets and bombs, literally.

Which is why I am so, so, so thankful for the next two words in Scripture. Don't look yet! These, I believe, are two of the most important words that have ever been written. But I want to ask you a question and ask you to think about something before we look at them. Think for a moment with me about a time when just a few words completely changed your life. Can you think of such a moment? How about words like these? "I love you." "Will you marry me?" "Yes, I do." How about, "We're having a baby." "It's a boy." "It's a girl." Some of the best news in life comes in the form of just a few words. And I believe the best news that has ever been given is represented by just two words. Ephesians 2:4:

> **But God,**

But God, in the midst of all of the mess, come these words of contrast and hope. We are not doomed; we are not stuck. Psalm 40:2 says it well, ***He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire, and set my feet upon a rock.*** We do not have to be objects of wrath. We do not have to be dead, divided, destroyed, hurting and broken, suffering, and without hope. **But God**…two simple words that can literally change everything for any and every person who will hear and receive the message from those two words that introduce Ephesians 2:4:

> **But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace, you have been saved),** (Vs. 4-5)

But God…but God, seeing the utter mess that we had made of our world, sent an angel to a teenage girl to give her a message that she would become a mom without ever being with a man. For this child would be the very Son of God, who would literally be conceived by the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit.

But God…knowing how hurtful and painful and sinful we are, sent an angel to her future husband, to assure him that this was good, that she was pure, that this was of God.

But God…put a sign in the stars to call wise men from the East to travel afar, to come and behold the birth of a newborn King, and to give Him the worship that He was due.

But God…erupted into a silent night with an angelic chorus, appearing to a shocked and frightened group of shepherds, to proclaim good news of great joy. Listen to these beautiful and familiar words from Matthew's Gospel:

> **Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."** (Matthew 1:18-23)

And from Luke's Gospel:

> **While they were there,** [in Bethlehem] **the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**
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> **In the same region, there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This *will be* a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying,**
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> **"Glory to God in the highest,**
> **And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."** (Luke 2:6-14)

God saw the situation we were in. God saw our desperation. He saw the lack of peace in our hearts, in our homes, in our communities, in our countries. He saw our brokenness, our emptiness, our inability to fix even ourselves, let alone our world. God saw all of that and God could not stay away. God came near as a babe at Christmas. Why?

> **For God…For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish, but have everlasting life.** (John 3:16)

This is the context of Christmas. This fallen, broken and hurting world had, and has, a desperate need, a need greater than any other, a need for a gift that would be unlike any other. It was the gift of redemption. And on that silent night, in that stinky stable, God drew near. He came as Immanuel—God with us—and His coming changes everything. In Ephesians chapter 1, verses 7 through 9, we read:

> **In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him…**

Creation…Fall…Redemption—this is the context of Christmas. And not only did God provide forgiveness, chapter 2, verse 6 says:

> **…and He also raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus,**

Not only did God give forgiveness, He gives new life. If we are in Christ, we are positionally seated with Christ in the heavenlies, both now and forevermore. And we are able to experience His presence at any moment. And we are able to have all of Heaven's riches, empowering us to not only be with Him, but to actually become more like Him. And why did God do that? Verse 7:

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

For all of eternity, we will be the trophies of God's grace, not because of anything that we have done, but because of His kindness, the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us, in Christ Jesus. Wow! There is no one who will ever be able to say, "I did that." We did not earn it, and in fact, we cannot earn it. Verse 8:

> **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, so that no one may boast.** (Vs. 8-9)

Salvation is a gift, one that is received by faith. He did it all. All that is required of us is to say, "Yes", to believe in Him and His plan, and to open our hearts and trust not in ourselves, but in the One who loved us and gave Himself for us. And not one of us—no person in all of human history—will ever be able to look and say, "Look what I did." No, every single one of us will only say, "Look at the wonder of Him. Look at what He did out of the kindness and goodness of who He is!"

Now I wonder, "What's the best Christmas gift that you ever received?" Can you think of one that was really great? Or, what about the greatest gift of any kind that you've ever received? What is it that made the gift great? Well, I'm going to guess that it was at least one of these three things. One, it could have been great because it had lasting value. It was something that was really useful for a long period of time. Or maybe it was great because it was deeply impactful. It was personally

meaningful to you in some sort of a powerful way, or, third, perhaps it was great because it was an act of loving sacrifice on the part of the giver. It meant so much because of what it cost the one who gave.

This week, I hope and pray that each one of us will stop…stop and reflect on the gift that we have in Jesus. What gift could be greater? What gift has more lasting value than the gift that literally changes our lives and our eternal destiny? What gift is more deeply impactful than God giving Himself, that might come right to the heart of who we are, forgiving us, cleansing us, and changing us from the inside out? And what gift has ever been a more loving sacrifice than the God of the universe, looking at us and the mess that we have made, and saying, "I can't stay away. I must come near. I will become one of you and go to a cruel cross to die for you, that you might experience life in me." Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us that this salvation, this new life, this future hope, this everything, was not of us…and it's not the result of works. We cannot boast about it. Rather, as verse 8 says, **"It is the gift of God!"** The greatest Christmas gift: Salvation by the gospel of grace, through faith.

You know, I've always found it strange that Christmas is Jesus' birthday, but we get all of the presents. It seems a little weird, doesn't it? But maybe that's appropriate. I was thinking this week about Christmases gone by for me, and thought of one of my favorite Christmases. It's when I was a young kid, just beginning high school, and I really wanted something that year. I wanted a drum set so I could play in the high school pep band. But my parents were straightforward with me. They told me, "We can't get it. It just costs too much. We can't do that for you. We can't do it this year." And for some reason, I was okay with that. And for the first time in my life, I approached Christmas, not worrying about what I was going to get, but turning my focus upside down and thinking about what could I give? And for the first time in my life, I began to experience the joy of generosity, as I thought of all of the people in my world, and poured myself into seeking to give to them. And maybe, in the tiniest of ways, that reflects the heart of our Father, as seen in Ephesians chapter 2, because in the incarnation, God *gave*. **God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son**. And 1 John 4:14 reminds us, **We have seen and we testify that the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world!**

What is Christmas all about? It's that! God gave! God sent His own Son to be the Savior of the world. It began with a creation, in God's goodness creating men and women in His image. And it was very good. But for thousands of years that has been marked and marred by the Fall…and it was into that context that God brought redemption. It began at Christmas with an incarnation. It was completed at Easter with the resurrection…and it made possible a completely different life for you and for me. Verse 10:

> **For we are His workmanship** (That could actually be translated, *masterpiece.)*, **created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.**

What a contrast: From an object of wrath in verse 3, to a masterpiece of God in verse 10! This is the power of the gospel to change a life. This is why Christmas matters. This is why God came as a baby to give Himself as a man, and to rise again and conquer death. And He will come again as a King, to rule and reign. And in the meantime, we are to walk in the good works that He prepared

in advance for each one of us to walk in. From eternity past, God has known that you would be you, right here, right now. You were created on purpose, for a purpose. There has never been, and there will never be, another person just like you. In all of history, there's never been another you. In all the future to come, there will never be another you. You have been uniquely created by God, that you might be redeemed by God, and that you might be used by God to bring His goodness into a lost and broken world. You are not the byproduct of chance and circumstance. You are not an accident. You are not a mistake. You were created by God. And if you are in Christ, you have been recreated in Him…redeemed in Him, that you might bear His fruits, both in you, and also from you.

And this, friends, is why this week should be absolutely marked by hope and joy for all who know Him. And we should pray that this very week will be the week when countless others come to know Him.

I was so struck last week when I walked into a gas station. I got through the door and the first words that clearly hit me were these:

Fall on your knees, Oh hear the angel voices,
O night divine, O night when Christ was born.

And my spirit within me cried, *Yes*! And I thought, "Wow! How incredible is it that even in our messed-up world, there is still a time when the good news of God can be boldly and loudly proclaimed, even in a gas station. I'm often struck when I stop in for a soda, at how many people are there buying so much alcohol. I assume that, at least for some, it's to numb the pain, to make it through life in this fallen and broken world.

But maybe, maybe, just maybe, this week can be a week of hope, when even in a gas station, the good news rings out. Let us pray that we don't miss it, and that we embrace the hope that we have in Christ, as we seek to understand the story of Christmas in the context of the overarching story of humanity. And let us pray that God will use all of us, together, to look for opportunities to bring the news of that great gift—the world's greatest gift—to those who are still living in Ephesians 2, verses 1 through 3.

Redemption is the opportunity for hope and life. God offers to bring anyone who wants it, out of the darkness and death, for redemption is a gift! It is a gift of love!...forgiveness!...life!... freedom!...hope!...eternal salvation!...purpose!...calling!...and joy! That is a gift—the greatest Christmas gift—born in a stable, purchased on a cross, completed from an empty tomb. We can all have the hope of a very Merry Christmas because **But God…** changes everything!

Jesus, thank You. Thank You that You would not stay away. Thank You, oh God, that You came near. Thank You that You loved us and desired to help us in our circumstances and situation, to redeem us, to set us free! Fill us, oh God, with Your joy this week as we think of who You are and what You have done. and the wonder and the majesty of Immanuel, God coming near. In Your name we pray, Amen.

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