

March 29, 2009

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Created in Christ Jesus for Good Works*

### Ephesians 2:4 – 10

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. But it is only good news to those who have seen the depth of their own depravity before God. It tells us that apart from Christ there is no hope in this world or the next. And I believe that is why Paul thought it crucial to remind the Ephesians of the futility and desperateness of their situation before Christ, so that the blazing light of the gospel might shine all the brighter against that background. In the first three verses of this chapter he lays out our condition before Christ: We were dead in our trespasses and sins – that is we were dead to the things of God and unresponsive to Christ and His word. But strangely enough we were very much alive to sin, the desires of the flesh, following the course of this world, walking in step with the times, and captive to the prince of the power of the air. The whole world lies in the grip of the power of the evil one and we were gripped by that power – born as sons of disobedience, living for ourselves, by nature children of wrath – naturally doing those things God hates – and before God in His mercy made us alive all we did was sin. **So there we were: dead in sin, captive to Satan, children of wrath.**

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us,* Ephesians 2:4 God's rich mercy is rooted in His great love for us. His love says, 'You are Mine – I have chosen you and no power on earth or in heaven can keep you from My love – not your disobedience, not your rebellion, not your deadness, not your utter disregard for Me or your hostility toward Me. I will pour out My mercy on you and draw your affections and attentions to Me, and surround you with My presence so that you cannot resist My love and surrender to Me.' The very foundation of our salvation springs from the unmerited, undeserved, unlooked-for love of the Father for His children. In love and mercy He chose us – in love and mercy He called us – and in love and mercy He will keep us all the way to glory. This is the very thing that caused Paul to break out in unrestrained praise in chapter 8 of Romans:

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died more than that, who was raised who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, For Your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Romans 8:31-39

We have to understand that He loved us *even when we were dead in our trespasses*, as it says in verse 5, and in mercy, *He made us alive together with Christ "by grace you have been saved"* Ephesians 2:5 **Love, mercy and grace operated together to make us alive and save us. Grace means that we got what we didn't deserve – mercy means that we didn't get what we did deserve, and superintending over all of that is His great love with which He loved us.** I think it is crucial that we understand that it was God who made us alive. We speak so casually sometimes about 'coming to Christ' or 'trusting Christ' or 'being born again' as though we were responsible somehow. But unless God, because of His great love for us, had not in His mercy granted us repentance and by His grace filled us with the power to believe – we would never have taken a step toward Him.

He not only made us alive – saving us by His grace, He also *raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,* Ephesians 2:6 That may be a little hard to grasp – planted as we are here on earth, with nothing that looks remotely like heaven on the horizon. But if we understand that His making us alive together with Christ also means that heaven now is our real home – and our hearts long for home – we are just passing through here on earth – then we begin to get the picture. You've heard the saying, **'Home is where the heart is?'** That means that your true home is with the person or place that you love most. **And by His grace our hearts are more at home in heaven than earth** because it is as though when we trusted Christ, He took our hearts and placed them in heaven with Him. And now it is heaven that is calling us upwards, tugging at our heartstrings and holding our affections. Heaven governs our choices and circumscribes our lives. **Heaven is our real home because that is where our hearts are.**

Which is why Paul could say, *'To live is Christ and to die is gain'*. You cannot say that if your heart is still attached to this earth. It is just like the title of that song – *'I Left My Heart in San Francisco'*. The singer didn't mean that he was now heartless in New York because he had actually left his heart on the west coast. **He means that all his affections, all his longings and emotions were attached to San Francisco** – and after all his wanderings in other places, that's the place he would return, because San Francisco was home. To what place are your affections and longings attached? If they are not in heaven, you are going to be massively disappointed one day.

This is the point of passages like Matthew 6:19-21: *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Which begs the question – where is your treasure? This is one reason why money and the way we handle it is so crucial. One way to ensure that our hearts are set on heaven is to send our money there.

If you have read *The Treasure Principle* by Randy Alcorn, you will remember the story of William Borden. Borden, heir to the Borden family millions, rejected a life of ease in order to bring the gospel to the Muslim people. Refusing to even buy himself a car, he gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions. On his way to China to throw himself into ministry to the Muslims there, he stopped off in Egypt to study Arabic and minister to the Muslim population. After only four months of zealous ministry, he contracted spinal meningitis and died at the age of twenty-five. The epitaph on his grave in Cairo reads, *'Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life.'* (*The Treasure Principle*, p.37) I would add that unless his heart had been focused on heaven, we would be compelled to conclude that his life was a waste.

So what is the goal of God loving us and showing us mercy and lavishing His grace on us in salvation? Why is it that He made us alive and seated us in the heavenlies with Christ? Verse seven gives us the answer: *so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* Ephesians 2:7 What that means at the very least is that God has stuff in store for us that we can't even imagine the 1/1,000,000,000,000 part of. Because apparently there are coming **ages** – not just age – and all those **ages** make up what we call eternity – which is **forever** – and it will take that long for God to exhaust the store of His riches of His kindness, which by the way are exclusively toward **us**. **So when eternity ends, we can expect the riches of God's grace to end.**

And Paul goes on to remind us that our salvation and therefore our eternal experience of the immeasurable riches of His grace is all God's doing: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* Ephesians 2:8-9 I think it is extremely important to note here that Paul puts our salvation in the perfect tense – **you have been saved**. Elsewhere he speaks of **salvation as a continuing process**: *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* 1 Corinthians 1:18. And in Romans he speaks of **salvation as a future hope**: *Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.* Romans 5:9 But here it is an accomplished fact. I think that this speaks to the completed view of our salvation that was **begun by grace, is continuing by grace and by grace will be brought to completion.**

And it is not a result of our hard work, but all a result of His marvelous grace. *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* Ephesians 2:10 I love how Paul contrasts the truth that we cannot work to earn our salvation – with the truth that being saved means that we will do good works. We have to be careful here. **On the one hand good works won't get us into heaven – but on the other we won't get to heaven without good works.** The Bible explicitly says that we are the workmanship of God – created in Christ Jesus – **for good works**. That means that good works are characteristic of every genuine believer.

We also need to understand that good works are not an end in themselves. Jesus taught His disciples this: *You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* Matthew 5:13-16 So good works spring from a life that is salt and light in the world, and have as their goal the glory of God. If your life is a witness and testimony to the goodness and glory of God in the world, then what you do becomes good works. **Good works are meant to convey the glory of God as a witness to a watching world.** The short but brilliant life of William Borden I think captures the essence of what the Scripture means by *'...created in Christ Jesus for good works.'*

In 1904 William Borden graduated from a Chicago high school. As heir to the Borden family fortune, he was already a millionaire. For his high school graduation present, his parents gave 16-year-old Borden a trip around the world. As the young man traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, he felt a growing burden for the world's hurting people. Finally, Bill Borden wrote home about his "desire to be a missionary." One friend expressed surprise that he was "throwing himself away as a missionary." In response, Bill wrote two words in the back of his Bible: **"No reserves."** During his college years, Bill Borden made one entry in his personal journal that defined what his classmates were seeing in him. That entry said simply: **"Say 'no' to self and 'yes' to Jesus every time."**

Even though young Borden was wealthy, he arrived on the campus of Yale University in 1905 trying to look like just one more freshman. Very quickly, however, Borden's classmates noticed something unusual about him and it wasn't his money. One of them wrote: **"He came to college far ahead, spiritually, of any of us. He had already given his heart in full surrender to Christ and had really done it. We who were his classmates learned to lean on him and find in him a strength that was solid as a rock, just because of this settled purpose and consecration."**

During his first semester at Yale, Borden started something that would transform campus life. One of his friends described how it happened: **"It was well on in the first term when Bill and I began to pray together in the morning before breakfast. I cannot say positively whose suggestion it was, but I feel sure it must have originated with Bill. We had been meeting only a short time when a third student joined us and soon after a fourth. The time was spent in prayer after a brief reading of Scripture. Bill's handling of Scripture was helpful. . . . He would read to us from the Bible, show us something that God had promised and then proceed to claim the promise with assurance."**

Borden's small morning prayer group gave birth to a movement that spread across the campus. By the end of his first year, 150 freshmen were meeting for weekly Bible study and prayer. By the time Bill Borden was a senior, one thousand of Yale's 1,300 students were meeting in such groups. Borden made it his habit to seek out the most "incorrigible" students and try to bring them to salvation. **"In his sophomore year we organized Bible study groups and divided up the class of 300 or more, each man interested taking a certain number, so that all might, if possible, be reached. The names were gone over one by one, and the question asked, 'Who will take this person?' When it came to someone thought to be a hard proposition, there would be an ominous pause. Nobody wanted the responsibility. Then Bill's voice would be heard, 'Put him down to me.'**

Borden's outreach ministry was not confined to the Yale campus. He cared about widows and orphans and cripples. He rescued drunks from the streets of New Haven. To rehabilitate them, he founded the Yale Hope Mission. One of his friends wrote that he **"might often be found in the lower parts of the city at night, on the street, in a cheap lodging house or some restaurant to which he had taken a poor hungry fellow to feed him, seeking to lead men to Christ."**

Borden's missionary call narrowed to the Muslim Kansu people in China. Once that goal was in sight, Borden never wavered. He also inspired his classmates to consider missionary service. One of them said: **"He certainly was one of the strongest characters I have ever known, and he put backbone into the rest of us at college. There was real iron in him, and I always felt he was of the stuff martyrs were made of, and heroic missionaries of more modern times."** Although he was a millionaire, Bill seemed to **"realize always that he must be about his Father's business, and not wasting time in the pursuit of amusement."** Upon graduation from Yale, Borden turned down some high paying job offers. In his Bible, he wrote two more words: **"No retreats."** When news of Borden's death was cabled back to the U.S., the story was carried by nearly every American newspaper. **"A wave of sorrow went round the world . . . Borden not only gave (away) his wealth, but himself, in a way so joyous and natural that it (seemed) a privilege rather than a sacrifice"** wrote Mary Taylor in her introduction to his biography. Prior to his death, Borden had written two more words in his Bible. Underneath the words **"No reserves"** and **"No retreats,"** he had written: **"No regrets."**

(Taken in part or whole from Mrs. Howard Taylor's biography of William Borden, *Borden of Yale '09*. Philadelphia: China Inland Mission, 1926)

Created in Christ Jesus for good works means, I think, at the very least, that all of our working, all of our living, all of our ambition and drive would be directed heavenward.

It also means that because our hearts are in heaven our ambition on earth is to please God and not ourselves.

I think it means as well that apart from faith in Christ, there is no rational or understandable explanation for our lives.

I think it means that we spend our lives in the pursuit of God.

And I think that it means lives over which can be written - **"No reserves" "No retreats," "No regrets."**

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

*Our gracious God and Father,*

*Let the truth that we have been created in Christ Jesus for good works penetrate deep into our soul and heart and mind. Let it burn brightly in our lives through what we do and say and think. Let it circumscribe our living and stimulate and energize our ambitions. Let it put godly backbone in all our labors and direct our hearts toward heaven. May we be those who gladly spend all and be spent for the cause of Christ throughout the world. Thank You for Your great unmerited, undeserved, unlooked-for love and Your rich mercy that called us out of death into life. Grant that we would be so impacted by the gospel that no cost would seem too high, no sacrifice too great, no comfort too dear, to bring this light to the nations. May our theme be to live is Christ and to die is gain and our motto be "No reserves" "No retreats," "No regrets.". Let us truly delight in You through Jesus Christ and spread that joy through the gospel to all peoples, we pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto you;  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.***