

The Wealth of God

Ephesians 2:4-9 | Bryce Beale | October 15, 2017

Years and years the ancient people of God toiled under the Mosaic Law—Israel intended by that law, by a perfect compliance with those words etched in stone, to reach up her human arm and take hold of righteousness. Not infrequently the national voice, in a spark of zeal, cried out, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.”¹

The sons of Jacob stand as the representatives of every soul that has ever sought to justify itself before God. Their attempt in the plains of Shinar to build a tower of works up to heaven, there to meet God, has been continued by the Hindus, ancient and modern, who have added to the structure by their castes and Karma; Muslims have come alongside Christians, and both have tried by their thoroughly burnt bricks of good works, or by a crusade or its cousin, the jihad, to stick the neck of their tower into the heavenlies.

So much sweat and toil has gone into this tower. So many masses attended, so many churches occupied, so many temples filled; so much money put into the offering trays or donated to a ministry. And all because we expect that, at the end of our long day of life, when we have finished our religious toil under the hot sun, we will come inside, wipe the sweat from our brow, and receive a paycheck of righteousness from God.

But God doesn't cut those kinds of checks.

“Israel,” writes the apostle Paul, “who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works.”²

And he continues, with words that might be equally applied to any religionist the world over, any person fatigued by the demands of religious ritual and rule, any person wishing to be right with God but with outreaching fingertips always shy of the ledge: “being ignorant of the righteousness of God,” he writes, “and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”³

This is the gospel: you are poor. You have no righteousness. All the work you have done to accrue a righteous credit, none of it extends beyond your imagination. Your balance remains at zero. You have sought to

¹ Exodus 19:8 (ESV); cf. 24:3.

² Romans 9:31-32.

³ 10:3-4.

establish your own righteousness, but your Babel will totter and fall before your eyes.

But this too is the gospel: God is rich. Yes, now our pick strikes something solid; our deadness, our nothingness, our depravity, our inability to reach a righteousness of our own devising, these are merely the layers of dirt we must dig through to reach the golden ore that now we find. And it is nothing less than the surpassing wealth of God.

God is not the absentee father of the deist, and not the grandfatherly figure imagined by the cultural Christian. He is the source of being; he is satisfied within himself, an eternal trinity of everlasting joy. Oh, the depth of his riches! By what currency will we measure his wealth? What is God's net worth? He is a fountain overflowing its brim.

The gospel teaches that you are too poor to reach God, but he is rich enough to reach you. You are too dead to seek him; he is alive enough to seek you. You have no righteousness to offer God; Christ has a perfect righteousness which he is willing to give you. You have no animal for the sacrifice; but on the hill of the LORD, on Golgotha, the spotless lamb has been provided by God himself.

We are poor, but he is rich. That is the gospel which Paul preaches.

And he preaches it in few places as clearly as here, in Ephesians 2:4-9. Our poverty we considered last week, from verses 1-3. Now we turn our eyes away from our nothingness, to the great somethingness, the great everything, that is our Creator and our God. We push aside the dirt and look with open eyes at the unearthed riches of Jehovah.

EPHESIANS 2:4-9

This chapter began "And you." What followed was a valley littered with dust-dry bones. That is the story of man—spiritual deadness, overcast by a hopeless shadow; absolute poverty. Verse 4 begins, "But God." This is the story of God, and it is a story of wealth.

There are two things in verses 4-9, and these will guide us today: first, we find what God, coming upon this valley of dry bones, has done. And secondly, we find why he has done it. Here is the what of the gospel, and the why. Let us look at both in order.

Made alive

First then, the gospel's "what."

The dry bones are before us, surrounded by the rubble of a fallen Babel. In this moment and this place we accept heaven's verdict of ourselves, in our natural state, and we abandon our attempts for heaven. We stop attempting to establish our own righteousness—and what do we find?

Verse 1, “And you were dead.” The valley. Now, verse 4, “But God,” a light dawning over the valley’s rim, christening its contours. And then, in the verse following, “made us alive.” The sun rises.

Our hearts weep for the spiritual poverty and futility of mankind through history.

Somewhere, like one grain of sand in the hourglass of time, is a Hittite mother of the ancient world. Day by day she raises her children, she prepares their meals, she faces the joys and sorrows of life—but never over her soul did the sun of righteousness ever dawn. She died clinging to an idol, her soul as cold as the molten image she held.

Somewhere else, a Greek soldier lies upon the earth, one pawn sent from home by the whims of greater men, now fallen with an arrow in his side. He loses hold of the only world he has known, and cries to an unknown god. He never saw the dawning of the day, and never knew the way to righteousness. He dies, already a dead man.

A medieval peasant puts his tilling tool into the earth, falsely secure in the promises of a lifeless church. He had no righteousness! An African child sits before a fire, but none of its light can touch her soul. An imam lives to see the brightest days of the Ottoman Empire, but still his soul is unsatisfied, still he sits in the valley of darkness and death, still the question of God’s disposition is unanswered.

And today this history continues. It seems certain that some of you still occupy the valley. Your bones may be counted among the rest; you are dead to all things spiritual, dead to God, the greatest fact of our existence. The sands of time fall, day follows day, but your heart rarely turns to thoughts of your Creator. This morning marks something unusual, rather than usual, for you—God-thoughts do not frequently fill your mind, or if they do, they are not thoughts of love to God, but of disgust or dread.

Is it because you still reside in verses 1-3? Are you trusting that your bones will muster up enough strength to walk to God? Bare bones never yet have walked anywhere. Are you waiting for faith enough to come to God? How many crumbs of faith must you sweep together in the empty cupboards of your soul before you come to God?

Forsake your pursuit of those crumbs; give up all efforts of your own. If your preoccupation is still with yourself, you are in verses 1-3—those verses are preoccupied with you. But if you would live, you must move out of that realm and into verse 4—you must move past a sight of your own deadness, necessary as that is, and you must now follow the progression of this passage, from “And you” to “But God.”

That is the light breaking into the valley! Move from your poverty, to God’s wealth.

Go to verse 5 and read, “even when we were dead in our trespasses,” yes, there you are, but only as a parenthesis. Do not stop there. Now step into the light of what follows: “God made us alive.”

The Scottish pastor Robert Murray McCheyne sat one day under the teaching of Thomas Chalmers. And Chalmers, quite conscious of the tendencies of many in his day to look obsessively inward for some assurance of salvation, to dig into their own souls until they despaired of eternal life, said, “...if you wish to look well inwardly, look well out...The true way to facilitate self-examination is to look believingly outwardly.”⁴

McCheyne took this to heart—he wrote these words down among others and underlined that last sentence.

No doubt they were part of the inspiration for one of his most famous lines, which resembles very much the emphasis of our text. He wrote:

“For every look at yourself take ten looks at Christ.”⁵

For every three verses on your natural poverty, let us have four or five on Christ’s wealth.

In verse 8 we find the one thing necessary for salvation: “For by grace you have been saved *through faith*...”⁶

This faith is an outward look. You may look inside and find a dead man’s tomb; you may so analyze your soul that, by the Spirit’s convicting work, you see the dry bones of your deadness. But until your eyes lift up, and look out to Christ; until you look up from your utter lack of righteousness, and see God’s righteousness offered you at the cross of Jesus, you are still dead in your sins.

It was the testimony of Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, that he had been saved in a little Methodist chapel on a snowy day. He had long felt himself condemned by sin, but he could not figure out how to be saved. And it made him miserable.

But then, in that little church house, an uneducated man stood up to fill the pulpit for a preacher who could not make it because of the snow.

⁴ Quoted in John Piper, “He Kissed the Rose and Felt the Thorn: Living and Dying in the Morning of Life: Meditations on the Life of Robert Murray McCheyne,” [desiringGod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/he-kissed-the-rose-and-felt-the-thorn-living-and-dying-in-the-morning-of-life), <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/he-kissed-the-rose-and-felt-the-thorn-living-and-dying-in-the-morning-of-life> (Feb. 1, 2011; accessed Oct. 14, 2017).

⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁶ Emphasis mine.

And through a thick accent, this simple man preached on a passage from Isaiah: “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.”

“Now lookin’,” said the man, “don’t take a deal of pain. It ain’t liftin’ your foot or your finger; it is just ‘Look.’ Well a man needn’t go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look.”

He added, “many on ye are lookin’ to yourselves, but it’s no use lookin’ there. You’ll never find any comfort in yourselves.”

A short time afterward, much to the young Spurgeon’s surprise, the man looked directly at him and said, “Young man, you look very miserable. And you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.”

And lifting his hands, he cried out, “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live!”⁷

And in that moment, Spurgeon looked. He believed. His eyes turned away from himself, and fixed themselves upon the crucified Christ. He moved from the death of verses 1-3, and into the life of verses 4 and following.

You may object, “This seems too easy.” Oh, I promise you, salvation is the hardest work of any ever done under the sun. It costs more than anything; more than all the precious metals we could mine from our whole globe of dirt.

The gospel does not say salvation comes cheap—it says salvation comes at a hefty price tag. But, it adds, we do not pay it. Christ does.

You see this in the very verbs of our salvation, found in verses 5 and 6. God “made us alive *together with Christ*.” He “raised us up *with him* and seated us *with him* in the heavenly places *in Christ Jesus*.”⁸

Remember that only a chapter ago, Paul prayed we would know God’s power at work in us, the very power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in heaven. And now we understand his prayer—he wishes we by the eyes of faith would see that all God accomplished in his Son, by his death and resurrection, he means to work in us. How so? By *uniting* us to Christ.

⁷ Quoted in “The Personal Testimony of Charles Spurgeon,” [middletonbiblechurch.org](http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/helpseek/spurgeon.htm), <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/helpseek/spurgeon.htm> (accessed Oct. 14, 2017).

⁸ Emphasis mine.

This is what we would call a vital union. We have no life in ourselves; but Christ has life in himself.⁹ Salvation is the joining of our souls to Christ, who has been raised to newness of life, so that we may share that life. As he was physically lifted from the grave, so every soul that is joined to him partakes of his spiritual life.

Spiritually, if you are in Christ, you live. And more, you are seated with him in heaven.

“Well, I don’t feel like that. I feel like I’m in Evansville, on planet earth.” Physically, yes. But spiritually, as we read in Colossians 3, “your life is hidden with Christ in God.”¹⁰ I would say more on this topic, except that all it means alludes me. Who can tell exactly what it means to be united to Christ, except that it is wonderful? It is something real, something true.

And because our salvation is tied so closely to Christ himself, it can be free. He resurrects by the power of his indestructible life, by his piety he is raised again; and we are merely like the dead man that was thrown into Elisha’s tomb and, touching the bones of that great prophet, was resurrected on contact.

So look, look to Christ! Be joined to him by faith, and you will, you must, live.

Grace

We have seen then the “what” of the gospel. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, look to him and his work on the cross, and you, though dead, will live, will be joined to him and will be seated with him in the heavenly places.

But why? We have called ourselves spiritual paupers, dead men, dry bones, children of wrath; why then does verse 4 begin, “But God”? Why not “And you were dead in sin...And God condemned you for it.” Why, “You were dead...But God made you alive”? What explains that shift?

We are asking the “why” of the gospel.

And in our text we find our answer, put in clear terms and in many ways.

The summary is interjected into verse 5, and then it reappears more fully in verses 8 and 9. See verse 5: God “made us alive together with Christ” and then, as if Paul could not wait to say it, he adds, “by *grace* you have been saved.”¹¹

⁹ John 5:26.

¹⁰ V. 3.

¹¹ Emphasis mine.

In verse 8 we find it again: “For by grace you have been saved through faith.”

The why of the gospel is answered in one word, namely, *grace*.

Grace means God has enough, is enough, to reach out to us without any initiation from us first. Grace means God gives, though we cannot give him anything in advance or in return. Grace means God is so satisfied within himself that he can, without our pleading, rush like the waters of a broken dam into the valley of our dry bones. Grace means salvation is pushed to us, not pulled by us. It means we do not build a Babel of our religion up to God, but he sends his Son down to us.

Paul makes this point in many ways.

See verse 4 again: “But God, being rich in mercy.” This is grace in the form of mercy.

Now, a nominal mercy may be moved by an innocent sufferer, by an abandoned kitten, by a starving child. Perhaps a middle-class mercy would weep for these miserables.

Yes, “perhaps for a good person,” as Paul elsewhere writes, “one would dare even to die.”

But what if there were such thing as a *rich* mercy? What if there were a mercy flowing so forcefully from its source, that not even the evil of the object it pitied could stop its rush? What if not even a Hitler-heart—or a whole world of them!—could prevent its overwhelming power?

Then, then we might read that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Here is a God rich in mercy, filling the valley of dry bones by the breaking of grace upon grace, wave upon wave, unhindered by our sin.

Turn your head in this hall of wonders, and you will find another display of grace, continuing in verse 4: “because of the great love with which he loved us.”

Here is grace in the form of love.

Now, a good love, there is much a good love could accomplish in this world. A good love may blossom into romance; a good love may give itself to raise her little children by sacrifice after sacrifice; a good love may take up arms to guard the one he cherishes.

A good love will make you love those who love you.

But Jesus taught, “if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?...You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”¹²

A good love is not the kind of love which motivates the Creator—praise him for it! What kind of a love fills his heart? “because of the *great* love with which he loved us.”

A good love will knock at your door; but a great love will break your door down to pull you from the flames. A good love will offer a hand toward the valley of dry bones; a great love will grab hold an unclean femur. A good love will shake a friendly hand; a great love will shake the hand of an enemy, and touch the skin of a leper.

We are not surprised therefore when we come upon the 7th verse: God made us alive “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

When we see Christ’s grace, displayed as a rich mercy and a great love, we sing with our Welsh brothers their beloved revival hymn:

Who His love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He can never be forgotten
throughout heav’n’s eternal days.¹³

We are destined for this. Five million years will not find us mere particles of matter scattered throughout the universe: we will be alive, more alive than we have ever been, and will be lauding the grace of Christ “throughout heav’n’s eternal days.”

No human yet, no Christian of church history and no member of God’s people today, great or small, has been able to answer, “How rich is God’s grace?” We bring our graduated cylinders, our beakers, our liquid measuring cups into the valley, and we try to measure the amount of grace that has poured in and filled that valley. But you see, even if we by some coordinated effort could measure the grace we now see, by the time we had finished, it would have doubled or tripled. Grace upon grace pours into the valley, and never seems to stop.

These riches are, in the apostle’s words, immeasurable. And every ounce of that great body of God’s grace is compactly filled with a kindness toward us.

As the bones are drenched by grace, no longer dry, as they are infused with life and come back together; as the sinews and the muscle form,

¹² Matthew 5:46, 48.

¹³ William Williams, “Here Is Love Vast As the Ocean,” Hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/text/here_is_love_vast_as_the_ocean (accessed Oct. 15, 2017).

and they are made into living beings again, God looks at what his work has done, and smiles.

It was all of his doing, and as with the creation of the world, here at our recreation he can see all he has made and assess it as, behold, very good. His grace has accomplished this.

Conclusion

You see then why our text turns, in verses 8 and 9, to those memorable words: “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.”

What do you have to brag about? If you are incarcerated, and a friend bails you out, will you brag of your contribution? “Well, he did bail me out, but if I hadn’t done something foolish to get in there in the first place he never would have had the opportunity.”

No—the grace of God teaches us that in the matter of salvation, we contribute nothing but our sin and death. We necessitate salvation; God accomplishes it. We get ourselves into the worst plight imaginable; God gets us out.

Brothers and sisters, we will be praising the immeasurable riches of God’s grace for a long, long time. But it is our privilege that we are permitted to begin training our voices now—and not just in the happier seasons of our life.

When the devil tempts your soul with accusations, and reminds you of your unworthiness, so that you look into your heart and are paralyzed by grief—now, now is the time to sing the grace of God! Now is the time to tell that Tempter and yourself, “by grace I have been saved; it wasn’t something I accomplished or could possibly continue. It is a gift from God—and I will boast in the Lord, who has done it.”

When men scorn you, or friends forsake you; when your finances turn south; when your earthly aspirations breathe their last—now is the time to sing the grace of God. In the physical world, you may feel dry, but in the spiritual, where it really matters, the fountain still flows over the ridge of the valley with grace upon grace, more than you can measure. Here you may be despised; there, you are seated in the heavenly places with Christ. Here you are hated; but there, you are loved. God’s smile is yours, and yours forever—that is the gospel, and that is the measure of the grace of God.

If you feel poor, it is because you are. But when you have once looked at your poverty, turn your eyes and ten times see: God is rich, and his grace is more than you ever yet thought it to be.