

Why Aren't We in Heaven, Yet?

A Case for Personal Evangelism

Scripture Reading — Ephesians 2:1-10 (KJV)

1 And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; 2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: 3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, 5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) 6 And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: 7 That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Sermon

New Year brings to mind the resolutions we make, quite enthusiastically, this time of the year. It is another matter that many of us succumb to the circumstances and give up our resolve sooner or later.

Talking about resolutions, we expect God to be true to His commitments and to be faithful to us all the time. We take God for granted and offer Him no options. On our part, more often than not, we are neglectful of our part of the agreement with Him. Let us call to mind the words of the Covenant Prayer; we should, perhaps, pray it every day, and not just once a year during the Covenant Service.

Today, I want to talk about the task which Jesus Christ Himself commissioned us to undertake. The fact that He spoke of it four times after His Resurrection shows the importance He attached to this Great Commission. Maybe it is time that you and I make a new resolution, a resolution never to be broken. We will return to this as we close today's deliberations.

Let us begin by asking ourselves a couple of questions. How many present here today have accepted Jesus as their personal Saviour? And having accepted Jesus, how many of us feel that we have been saved?

The question before us is this: if we have been saved, then why aren't we in Heaven, yet?

When we talk about being saved, we should also know how we have been saved. In Mark 16:16 we read, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." The spiritual death and rebirth of the believer brings us to the subject of baptism. In John 3:5 and 3:7 we read, "Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God... Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." Christ's emphasis on baptism rests more on the spiritual nature of the event than on the rituals surrounding it. The ordinance of baptism, therefore, symbolises the natural man, washed in the blood of Christ, becoming a spiritual man.

However, such a rebirth happens only through the grace of God. Paul brings out this fact very explicitly in the passage from Ephesians chapter 2 read to us just a while ago. A brief discussion of these verses will serve as a forerunner to our deliberations today.

Here is the scene, drawn from the opening verses of that passage: you go to the doctor, and you know that something is not quite right with you, but you do not know what it is. So you say to the doctor, "Give it to me straight; tell me what is wrong with me." And let us imagine the doctor says, "It is worse than I thought. The problem is that you are dead." That is Paul's diagnosis of the human problem. Paul says that we are dead in our trespasses and our sins. Our condition, therefore, is more serious than we might think. Paul is not talking about being physically dead; he is talking about our spiritual death, in other words, our being separated from God.

Verse 4 begins with some redeeming words: "But God, who is rich in mercy..." These words turn the situation completely around, from death to life in Christ. Paul affirms that God is rich in mercy and loves us even while we

are sinners; and because His character is such, God does something to bring us back from this state of spiritual death. Paul says that God “hath quickened us together with Christ.” It is not that we come back to life all by ourselves, but that we come back to life together with Christ, because of the atonement He obtained for us on the Cross; and in the bargain, God restores our relationship with Him.

When I read verses 8 and 9, I sense that Paul is concerned we may assume we have been saved because of our own good deeds, and may begin to boast of it. He is afraid that we might come to think that being a Christian makes us better than other people, instead of simply realising that we have received a gift: the grace of God. If we are proud of our salvation, or boastful of our identity in Christ, or if it leads us to think that we are better than others, then we have not truly understood what Christianity is about.

In verse 10 Paul says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” Notice the phrase “unto good works.” It almost sounds like a contradiction of what Paul had argued in the preceding verses, that nothing we do can earn us salvation. However, there is no contradiction here. While salvation is through the grace of God alone, we are mandated to carry on the work Christ appointed us to do. John reports Jesus as saying, in John 14:12, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.”

What is this work of which Jesus has spoken to us? It is essentially the work He Himself had done. Jesus regarded the redeeming of souls as His sole purpose in coming to the earth. In Matthew 18:11 we read, “For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost.” He conveyed this same purpose to His disciples, and through them, to all of us. He said to Simon Peter and Andrew, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). Paul later confirmed that the ministry of bringing people to God has been entrusted to all believers. He wrote, in 2 Corinthians 5:18, “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.” Having been saved, this should be our purpose in life. We cannot simply outsource it to ordained pastors and other clergy.

The task Jesus has given us is unambiguous, and He gave it to us directly in the form of the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19 and 20, Jesus said, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.” A Great Commission indeed for all believers, and we are not left alone in this task, for He will be with us always, till the end of time. Further, in John 15:16 we read, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain...”

Jesus wants us to partner with Him and evangelise all who are yet to know Him. That is precisely why we are here, and not in Heaven, yet. There is no ambiguity in the mandate given to us. So why are we standing still, and not reaching out to others? That is the question before most of us this morning.

We accept Paul's assertion that we have been saved by the grace of God. One may wonder how others, who have not accepted Jesus, might then be saved. I thought it would be helpful, therefore, briefly to examine the doctrine of grace as propounded by Augustine, the great philosopher and theologian. The grace of God is not a one-time endowment; it has three aspects, Prevenient Grace, Operative Grace, and Cooperative Grace.

Prevenient Grace is God's grace, active in human lives before they are converted. Grace “goes ahead” of humanity, preparing the human will for conversion; it does not become operative in a person's life only at the moment of conversion, for the process leading up to that conversion is itself one of preparation, in which God's Prevenient Grace is at work. This is a critical point for us to grasp: God's grace is not a gift reserved for Christians alone; His Prevenient Grace is at work in all human beings. There is, therefore, something we ourselves are called to do, so that the Prevenient Grace already at work in others may lead them to a life in Christ.

Operative Grace is that by which God effects the conversion of sinners without any assistance on their part. Conversion is a purely divine process, in which God works upon the sinner; it comes to us as a gift of God.

Cooperative Grace, having achieved the conversion of the sinner, is that by which God now collaborates with the renewed human person in bringing about regeneration and growth in holiness. Having liberated the human will from its bondage to sin, God is now able to work together with that liberated will. The term “Cooperative Grace,” therefore, describes the manner in which grace continues to operate within human nature after conversion, so that we, in turn, may go on to win others for Christ.

This is precisely why Paul has cautioned us against boasting of the gift of God we have received. At the same time, we cannot remain silent and do nothing after receiving God's grace. We need to cooperate with Jesus, and reach out to all those who are yet to hear the good news. A word of caution is due here: we should not attempt to take on the work of the Holy Spirit. Our task ends with bringing the Word of God to the unreached; conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit.

According to traditional Jewish interpretation of the Bible, Israel's character as the chosen people was regarded as unconditional, as we read in Deuteronomy 14:2, "For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth." And speaking of the nation of Israel, we read in Deuteronomy 7:7, "The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people." While God knew that there were other communities and nations far more numerous, He chose Israel to be His special people. Yet God did not say that He was the God of the Israelites alone. He had a purpose: to reconcile humanity with Himself. But this purpose remained, for a long while, unfulfilled.

God's choice of timing is beyond our comprehension. "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). The Jews, perhaps, did not understand God's purpose for them, and failed Him completely. They tried to monopolise God. Jesus abolished their possessiveness towards God and towards the Law, and established that God is God of all creation. Jesus set up His Church with the mandate that its members, the Christians, should spread the good news to all corners of the world. Can we fail as the Jews did? Can we fail Jesus? If we cannot, then what are we doing about it?

Jesus knew that He would not always be present on earth in a physical sense; He also knew that the movement He had begun would continue after He had returned to His Father in Heaven. And He was right. Who would have guessed, two thousand years ago, that when the body of Jesus was laid in the ground, His body would rise again out of the ground, and that His resurrected body, His Church, would grow taller and taller, to some 2.15 billion people around the world today?

When Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17), He was using imagery familiar to them; but His call applies equally to all of us. It means that we should join Him in what He came to do: to carry the good news to the four corners of the earth, and to bring sinners to repentance. When we join His work, the Gospel becomes like a net, lifting us out of dark waters into the light of day and transforming our lives, as it did the lives of His disciples. Walking with Jesus will teach us, as it taught His disciples then, how He can use us to fish for people, and how, in turn, we may train new converts to find new waters where none have been fished before. The Gospel makes missionaries of all God's people. Let us remember what God said: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). What right, then, have we not to follow Jesus and do His bidding?

I am arguing a case for evangelism, both personal and corporate. We may be good Christians, faithful in worship and persistent in prayer; we may do a great deal of work around the Church in various capacities, and visit fellow Christians who are unwell; we may be regular in our giving to the Church. We may do all of this, and should continue to do all of it. But that alone is not enough. We need to obey the mandate given by Jesus; we need to reach out to the unreached.

Several questions come to mind when we ponder this subject. Where do we find people we can evangelise? How do we find the time to do it? What, exactly, is evangelism? These questions would require rather more time than we have this morning to answer fully; we may take them up on another occasion. Let me, however, try to offer an overview of the subject.

If we are going fishing, we need to go where the fish are. The reason many fishermen grow frustrated is that they do not go where the fish are. Most church people try to fish by sitting in the Church, and expecting the fish to come to them. It simply does not work that way; we cannot go fishing without getting our lines wet. Someone once told the story of a British fishing club whose members merely sat around swapping stories about the big one they had landed, or the great one that got away, but never once stepped into a boat or cast a line into the water. What kind of a fishing club would that be, whose members were content to admire the trophies on the wall, but never actually went fishing?

People are all around us; all we need is to be watchful. One can begin at home, with an unbelieving family member; then there are relatives, friends, classmates, and co-workers whom we can easily relate to; and there are Christians on the periphery of the faith who are in need of spiritual counsel.

There is a list of those who desperately need to be comforted with the Word of God: those who are suffering (Matthew 9:12; Luke 4:18-19); the sick and demon-possessed (Mark 1:32-34; 2:1-12; Acts 5:12-16); the poor, materially or spiritually (Luke 4:18; James 2:5; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31); orphans and widows (Exodus 22:22-24; Jeremiah 49:11); those in trial or tribulation (Isaiah 48:10; Exodus 2:23-25); those who are disappointed or in trouble (Psalm 50:15; 107:10-32); those bound by sin (1 Timothy 1:15; Luke 19:1-10; 7:36-50; 15:1-7); and also those who sincerely hunger for righteousness (Matthew 5:6).

As to how we might evangelise, there are many ways open to us: open-air preaching, trickle-down evangelism, door-to-door preaching, evangelising through a sermon, lifestyle evangelism, friendship evangelism, creative evangelism, internet evangelism, telephone evangelism, prophetic evangelism, and the use of the “wordless book” or coloured cards, among others. We may go into these in more detail when time allows.

I use social media extensively in this work myself, and while it began slowly, I have found that it is beginning to yield results.

The best way to undertake such work for Christ is in collaboration with the local Church. Just as we have a Women's Fellowship, a Youth Fellowship, and a Senior Citizens' Fellowship, it would be a good idea to establish an Evangelical Fellowship as well. The Church could organise a day's workshop to explore the subject further, as we did with Christian parenting.

Let me close here, hoping that what we have considered today provokes thought and interest in most of us. Let us, in our quiet moments, reflect and resolve upon a different New Year resolution this year, that each of us will make some effort, from now on, to obey the mandate given to us by Jesus our Lord.

So, friends: where are we casting our nets today?

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.