

## From the Pit to the Mountain Tops

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"I Believe in the Church" Series

Ephesians 2:1-6

Several years ago my family went to a conference in Southern California for Vineyard pastors. While we were there we decided to take a trip out to the desert to Palm Springs. So we piled into the car and drove off into the desert. It was a very hot summer day – about 100°, stifling hot in this desert. As you drive through the desert, all you see is vast stretches of emptiness; lots of sand, scrub bushes, cactus growing, tumbleweeds. There is very little that is alive. It is just emptiness in the whole valley. I imagine if you walked out in the desert there might be some pretty frightening snakes under some rocks – rattlers or scorpions, tarantulas. The desert is a picture of death. It is a picture of emptiness, barrenness.

In Palm Springs they have a cable car that takes you from the desert valley floor up 9000 ft. to the top of this very high mountain. It is a fascinating thing because you pass through 6-7 climatic zones as you move up the side of the mountain in this cable car. It is like traveling from Mexico, they say, to Northern Canada. You pass through all these different kinds of vegetation along the way.

Well, we thought it would be neat to go to the top of the mountain – at least I thought it was neat and the kids thought it was neat. So our family got in this car and the cable car held maybe 40 people. I rushed to the front of the car so that as the car moved up on these cables, I could have my face pressed against the glass so I could look down into the valley. It's really pretty cool. You are just leaning against the glass and you see down in the valley – 1000 ft. down; 2000 ft. down; 3000 ft. – it was an incredible sight. The higher you go the more of the valley you can see. After five minutes or so of moving on these cables, you can see the entire Palm Springs community and maybe 50 miles out. You see this huge stretch of the valley, this whole desert.

So I have my face pressed against this window, looking down, jabbering away to Marlene about all that you could see.

"Look at that road. You know, that's the road we came in on."

"There's the highway. Look, you can see the highway that the road connects to. That's how we came down from LA."

"Look, I think way out there do you see that building out there? I think that's where we stayed the last time we came down here to Palm Springs."

"Over that way towards the right, that's where our friend, Kevin, lives."

"Look, Marlene, do you see that community way out there? That's where my father bought property."

I am jabbering away and pointing out the different sights, leaning against the glass. And I wondered why Marlene was being so silent. So I turned to my left and I discovered that she wasn't standing there anymore. I turned around and found that I was talking to myself. Marlene wasn't next to me at all. Where did she go?

I pushed through the crowd, all these folks who were pressed up against the glass like I was pushing against one another to get a better view. And I walked through this crowd and I see that Marlene is standing at the other end of the cable car, the side that is facing the mountain and she is holding the pole. So I walked uphill toward where she was. I said, "Honey, what are you doing over here? You can't see anything from over here."

Marlene said, "Well, everyone is down at that end of the cable car and I was afraid that the car was getting unbalanced and so I came to stand over here to try to balance the car out."

I said, "Honey, you are totally missing the view. And there are 39 people down at that end and the cable car weighs maybe ten tons and you weigh about 110 pounds. I don't think you are going to be able to balance this car all by yourself."

She said, "I know, that's why you need to stand next to me." Well, you can't argue with that kind of logic.

Some of you who are afraid to fly know this one. You have to stay awake all through the flight and make sure that if the plane begins to tip, you can lean in the other direction, as the pilot may need a little bit of midcourse help.

Now, the story I just told is an absolutely true story. But it also serves as an illustration, a parable, if you will, for what I want to talk about today as we move forward in our study of the book of Ephesians. See, you can never really appreciate how incredible it is to be a Christian. What an extraordinary thing it is to be saved. Until you stare down into the desert valley that you have come from and stare up at the mountain top you have been brought to and recognize that this incredible ascent from the valley floor to the mountaintop was not accomplished by our powers, by us balancing the car, so to speak. That our ascent was accomplished by the power of someone else.

Here's my basic thesis today. You can't at all grasp what it means to be a Christian, how great your salvation is, how wonderful Jesus is and how grateful we ought to be him as our Savior, unless you realize the depth of the hole you were in. You can't really celebrate being a Christian or desire to share this Christian life with someone else, until you realize the height that you have been brought to solely by the power of God.

I have called today's talk "From the Pit to the Mountain Top." Let's pray.

*Ephesians 2:1-6 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”*

Now before we get into the details of Ephesians 2:1-6, let me give you the larger perspective. Just like Ephesians 1, Ephesians 2 can be divided into two parts. Putting it negatively, we could say verses 1-10 describes the pit we were in from the perspective of our relationship with God. And verses 11-22 describes the pit we were in from the perspective of our relationship with the people of Israel. Verses 1-10 stated negatively describes our starting point, which is separation from God. And verses 11-22, we see that our starting point in life is separation from God's people. okay? Separation from God, verses 1-10, separation from God's people, 11-22. That's the pit. That's the hole.

And stated positively, we could say that 1-10 describes our finishing point as union with Christ in heavenly places and verses 11-22 states that our finishing point is union with God's people as members of God's family and stones in God's holy temple. Separation from Christ; separation from God's people, that's the starting point. The finishing point is union with Christ, union with God's people.

Now Paul is continuing the theme he began in chapter 1. In chapter 1 he prayed that the eyes of our hearts would be open that we would grasp the power of God that was at work in raising Jesus from the dead and placing him at the right hand of the Father. Now, in chapter 2, he continues on this theme of the power of God in terms of our experience of being brought from the pit to the mountaintop, of being raised from death to life – and more than life, of being raised with Christ and being seated with him in heavenly places. The power of God is not just displayed in the resurrection of Christ. The power of God is displayed in the experience of every Christian who goes through a spiritual resurrection and a spiritual ascension.

Let's look at the particulars now. Now that we have the big picture, let's look at this text in more detail. Verses 1-3, we are down in the pit. It describes our past. Paul is describing our past. And starting in verse 4, we are up on the mountaintop and Paul is describing our present experience as Christians. Let me underline my basic thesis with you again. It is really important as we proceed through Ephesians 2 for you to get the basic framework. In order for you to appreciate how incredible it is that you might be called Christians, or to

appreciate how great a Savior Jesus is, it is important to look back down the mountain to where we came from.

People have a totally inadequate view of salvation because we fail to really comprehend what our starting point is in this world. A lot of folks simply do not grasp why it is that the son of God had to come into this world and had to die a bloody death by being nailed to a cross, naked. A lot of people don't understand why salvation has to be entirely of God, entirely by grace, without any human input or activity. The reason is because folks really don't appreciate the starting point.

We do not start in this world on neutral ground. You know the old popular, "Well you start off with a blank slate in life and then the environment writes on the slate, depending on your family and the inputs you get." That's the popular view. You start off as a blank slate and the environment writes on it. Paul is going to tell us that we start way down in a pit, in a hole, at the bottom of the well, looking up from the desert floor.

*That's what we see here in Eph. 2:1-3, As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*

This view that men and women start down in the pit, this biblical view is very different than the post enlightenment perspective that most folks have that is the foundation of a lot of our educational system and a lot of our social improvement efforts.

There was a French philosopher named Rousseau, who about 230 years ago entered a contest put on by the French Academy, which asked the question, "What's wrong with the world?" And Rousseau entered this contest and won a cash prize. His basic thesis regarding what's wrong with the world is that people are born basically good, but society corrupts these basically good people.

I'm okay; you're okay – it's just our environment that messes us up. It's our parents, our dysfunctional families, it is the bad schools you are forced to attend, it's the TV. The problem with people is that there are these forces from outside of us that corrupt us; otherwise, we would be basically good, loving, wholesome, giving people.

Of course, Rousseau's view is disproved every day in the homes of anyone who has a 2-year old, who they are trying to parent. I remember when my son, Daniel, was about 2½, nearly 3 years old and Marlene and I were watching him in a class of toddlers. We used to do Sunday School together and we were

doing the toddlers. And Daniel was sitting there playing with a little toy. Another little boy was much more aggressive than him and walked over and grabbed the toy out of Daniel's hands. Daniel was peaceful and good-natured. He went over and he got another toy and was sitting down and playing with that. The same boy came over and pulled the toy out of his hands and walked to the other side of the room. This happened a third time and finally I saw my son stand up, pick the boy off of his feet, and throw him about 10 ft. into a wall. And then he sat back down and began playing with the toy that he had gotten.

Where did this vengeance inside of my good-natured son come from, this violence, this rage, this possessiveness of what he had? Where did it come from? Or our applause for what he did? I certainly didn't instruct him and say, "Now, Dan, if anyone wants to take one of your toys, you make sure you pick them up and throw them into a wall."

Isn't this true, parents? That beautiful sweet innocent child of yours, did you sit down and train them to throw a temper tantrum? "okay, honey, here's how you act stubborn. Here's how you screw up your little face and stamp your feet and pound your little fists and scream." I remember once asking Marlene when one of the kids was acting particularly nasty, I said, "Honey, how did we give birth to little Hitler?"

It is because most folks go to the other end of the cable car and don't look down into the valley that people have such a superficial view of salvation. That you think that you are basically okay. If you don't grasp the depth of your predicament, then what you think you need from God is maybe a helping hand. Maybe you need a little bit of church. Maybe you need a little bit of religion to straighten you out or to straighten your kids out. Yeah, we'll take them to church and give them a little bit of church. Lots of people analyze their situation in a superficial way.

"Well, I am going through a rough patch right now, so God, I need your help. I am going through this divorce, this separation, I am going to go under the doctor's knife, I am going in for an operation, I would really appreciate it, God, this is a tough season in my life, if you could lend me a helping hand."

There are a lot of folks who come to Christ looking for Christ to be their divine friend, their helper, their advisor, their financial counselor, their marital counselor.

You don't get Christianity at all until you have come face to face with the depth of the hole that you are in and your desperate need not for a friend, but a Savior. You need a rescuer. You need a liberator. Until you see yourself as absolutely hopeless, absolutely through and through corrupt, you never really cry out to Jesus Christ to save you.

Chuck Colson, who many of you have heard of, he was Richard Nixon's legal counsel during the whole Watergate break-in and was a master of dirty tricks and political sleaze. In his book, *Born Again*, he talks about an evening where he sat down with a businessman, Tom Phillips. This was during the throes of Watergate. Colson was being tried for obstruction of justice. In the book he said that his friend, Tom Phillips, tried to explain how to accept Christ. But Colson said, "I was totally baffled. I was tired. I was empty. I was sick of the scandal and the accusations. I was sick of the way that I was living. But never once did I really see myself as a corrupt person. I didn't see myself as a sinner through and through. 'Politics was a dirty business,' I thought, 'and I was good at it.' 'And what I had done,' I rationalized, 'wasn't a whole lot different than the usual political maneuverings.' I was just doing what the other side was doing."

Colson said, "But that night when I left Tom's house and sat alone in my car, my own sin – not just dirty politics, but the hatred, the pride, the evil, the lust that was so deep within me was thrust before my eyes. For the first time in my life I felt myself to be thoroughly unclean and worst of all, trapped."

Down in the pit. And until you see what your situation is, really grasp it – where you're at, where your starting point is – until you see yourself as through and through corrupt, not just other people, not just former President Clinton, or the guy living under the bridge, or the drug addict, or the child molester, but you – until you grasp your situation and acknowledge it, embrace it, you can't be a Christian.

So what is the situation of men and women? Paul says first of all, we start off dead. That for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. A little baby comes into the world so full of life, pink and beautiful, innocent. But here we read that all of us come into the world spiritually dead.

You say, "What do you mean I am dead? I can bench press 300 pounds. I can swim a mile three times a week. I just ran in the last Columbus marathon."

When the Bible says here that we are dead, it is not an indictment of your intelligence. It is not saying that you are brain dead or that you have a flat EEG. You can be a rocket scientist, you can be physically fit, you can be a physician, you can have a personality that just lights up a room, be vivacious and effervescent and all of that, but still be dead in the sense that Paul is talking about here when he says "You were dead in your transgressions and sins." He is not talking about being physically dead, but spiritually dead. Dead with respect to God.

Oh, you may believe that God exists as far back in your life as you can remember. There may never be a time in your life when you didn't believe that God existed. You may have attended church for years, but in terms of being spiritually alive, of being in touch with God's Spirit, of being aware of spiritual

reality, you are dead. We are born in this world out of touch with the Spirit of God. We live in a world of the living dead.

I want to give you a picture of what I mean. I have used this before, but I think it is a helpful illustration. Right now, as you sit here in your seats, you are being bombarded with radio waves from WNCI and WCOL and Sunny 95 – all these radio signals are going through your body. You can't see them, you can't smell them, you can't touch them. But they are real. They are there. They are being beamed through the air. And if you had a radio receiver, if you had a radio, you could pick them up.

God is invisible all around us. He is just as real as those radio waves. But it is like you and I have been born with dead receivers. The problem is not in the strength of the signal that is being sent. The signal from God's Spirit is plenty strong. His voice is plenty loud. The problem is that we don't have the right equipment, but better, we have the right equipment, but the equipment is dead. Our bodies are alive, but our spirits are dead. We are cut off from God.

That's what Paul is talking about in being dead in sins and trespasses. You are born cut off from God's Spirit, cut off from an awareness of God's voice or presence. A person who is spiritually dead can't make heads or tails of the Bible. It just doesn't make any sense to them. A person who is spiritually dead picks up the Bible and it is just a boring ancient book, filled with crazy stories. Why would you want to spend any time reading that? To a person who is spiritually dead, movies aren't boring, magazines aren't boring, watching some football game isn't boring, but the Bible? Forget about it.

Every week cars pull up in front of churches all over America and they drop off dead people. Dead people are wheeled into the church – row after row of dead people. Sometimes the person in the pulpit is wheeled up there, but they are dead. There is no spiritual awareness, no spiritual reality. You can tell when a person is dead, even though they are in church, because their evaluation of church will be from an entirely unspiritual perspective. After the service they will talk about what the people wore or how nice the building was or what the music sounded like or they will critique the vocals or whether the message was entertaining or if the room was the right temperature.

See, spiritually alive people evaluate church from a totally different perspective. A spiritually alive person would ask, "Do I sense God's presence in the worship?" Have I been challenged today to love Christ more, to put off my sin? To act in faith in God's Word? As a result of this morning, am I more prepared to live the way God wants me to live? Oh, they might mention the building or the music, but a spiritually alive person is in touch with something deeper that's going on. They are in touch with the voice of God and the presence of God. And they evaluate things based on am I drawing nearer to God as a result of what I am doing and hearing?

And Paul says we were enslaved. Not only were all of us born spiritually dead, but we were born enslaved to the world, to Satan and to our own sinful natures. Verses 2-3, *...in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us lived among them at one time gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature, following its desires and thoughts.*

People are always asserting how free they are. I am free to do anything I please. Why would you ever want to become a Christian? Naw, I don't want to become Christian, it's so restrictive, so narrow. Becoming a Christian takes away your freedom. You have to go to church and you can't party any longer. You aren't allowed to sleep with your boyfriend or girlfriend. That's what teenagers would say. Teenagers think this all the time. I don't want to become a Christian. Maybe when I am really old and worn out and can't have any fun any more. That would be a good time.

But adults think the same way. I want to be free.

The truth is, of course, that we are all slaves of something. No one in the world is free. Bob Dylan sang that 30 years when he sang, "You have to serve somebody." You are either going to serve the Lord or you are going to be a slave of the world. I don't think it would be particularly hard to prove Paul's statement that people who are not Christians are slavish followers of the ways of this world. Is anything at all more apparent than the fact that for all of our rugged American individualism, and all of our claims of freedom and independence and doing our own thing, that there is absolutely a herd mentality that dominates this country and dominates the world in every single aspect of our thoughts and behaviors?

So often you hear exactly the same viewpoint using exactly the same words whether during the presidential scandal a few years ago: A person's private life has nothing to do with their job performance. Everybody does this. Over and over again like a mantra. Or with respect to abortion: A woman has a right to control her own body. You hear the same slogans and mantras repeated.

Talk about a herd mentality – everyone rushes to see the same movies and wears the same style of clothes and gets the same kind of haircut and listens to the same kinds of music and paints the interior of their houses with the same colors and reads the same books.

Free? The notion that we are free, and therefore don't want to become Christians, what a bunch of baloney. Apart from Christ we are absolutely enslaved to the viewpoints and thought processes and fashions and tastes dictated by the marketers and the designers and the media. You have to serve somebody. You serve the Lord or you serve the world.



Here in verse 2 Paul says we are also slavish followers of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. Literally, Paul is saying that we all follow a path grooved out by Satan. There is a rut in the road that has been grooved out by Satan and all of us get our wheels caught in the rut and we end up following this rut in the world toward our own destruction.

What does this mean to be influenced or to live according to the spirit of Satan? Practically, how does that spirit, the spirit of God's enemy, express itself in the lives of human beings?

What the apostle Paul is not saying is that people are born thoroughly demonized. That we all need to acknowledge that we are possessed and that we all need exorcism. When he says that you live in the rut grooved out by Satan, he is talking about something a little more subtle than severe demonization. But something that goes to the heart, to the core of the satanic spirit. We see Satan's influence every time we demand to be #1. Every time people vie with each other at a party or in an office to be the center of attention, every time we demand to have the limelight and we require that people acknowledge what we have done and we get bitter when they don't. Every time we demand to get the credit and the adulation and the praise, the spirit of Satan is at work.

Think about this with me. What was the sin that led Lucifer, this mighty angel, to fall? He was an angel, it says in Ezekiel, full of wisdom and beauty, but he coveted something that belonged to God alone. He wanted to be worshipped. He wanted to be #1. And we, every one of us, are born into this world as enslaved followers of this spirit.

What about me? What about my needs? What about how I feel? What about catering to me for a little while?

What spirit do you think is at work in most marital conflict? When two people are battling and wrestling with each other over their respective needs? You never have paid attention to my emotional needs. Well, what about my sexual needs? What about the fact that I like to be listened to. And I have asked you over and over again to join a softball team, something that I like to do. But you never want to do that. And you aren't even pulling half your weight around here in cleaning up. What about my need to rest?

What's at work when we say, "What about me? Look at me. Promote me. Adore me. Credit me – more than these other people." Have you found yourself angry because someone didn't pat you on the back or acknowledge you for a promotion or position? Someone else got to sing on the worship team. Someone else gets to be the leader. Have you been hurt or upset because no

one complimented you on the job you did? Have you been jealous because someone is better than you in an area that you prize – like speaking, singing or athletics or they are better looking?

What spirit do you think is at work when you can't enjoy another person's ability, when you grieve because they are thought of more highly than you?

It is the same spirit that led to Satan's downfall. It is the spirit that says, "I demand the glory. I demand the credit. I want to be acknowledged."

The Christian lives for the praise of God's glory. The sweetest thing in the Christian's ear is when someone comes up and says, "I thank God because of you. I praise the Lord because of what you did for me. Because of how you help me. Because of your encouragement." We want Jesus to be #1. Jesus to be acknowledged. Jesus to be worshipped.

Enslaved to the world. Enslaved to the spirit of this age. And Paul says finally, we are born enslaved to our own lusts and desires. Verse 3, *All of us lived among them at one time gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.* We aren't leaders, we are followers. The world and Satan and our own lusts and desires lead us around by the nose. That's the hole we are in.

Now what do you think it means to be enslaved by the cravings of your sinful nature, following its desires and thoughts. What does that mean?

There are lots of ways that the sinful nature expresses itself. But one simple way to think about your sinful nature is that no matter what it is we must have more. The demand for more. The fact that we are never satisfied, so we must have more money, a bigger house, a newer car, another woman, one more book, a larger kitchen, a bathroom big enough to play shuffleboard in, more satisfying sex. The insatiable continual appetite for more. That you are dragged and pulled into a whole variety of destructive activities simply to have more.

If you are a musician, more means another guitar. If you are into technology, it is the newest, fastest, most powerful computer or internet connection. It's another purse. It's another top. It's another boyfriend. It's more and more perverse pornography. It's another suit. Or if you are Saddam Hussein, it's another country. If you are Donald Trump, it's another business deal. If you were Emelda Marcos, it would be another pair of shoes. As Anna Nicole Smith recently said in the probate hearing on her billionaire husband's estate, "It takes a lot, it is very expensive to be me."

We could say the same thing about all of us. It is very expensive to be us. We all want more.

A successful business man recently commented that one of the great untapped businesses in America is drug, alcohol, gambling and sex rehabilitation hospitals. He said this is the fastest growth industry with huge profits for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This man said it can't fail. America just keeps producing more and more addicts. The demand for rehabilitation services is absolutely endless. We are hopelessly enslaved.

Whoever you are, your sinful nature keeps saying to you, "More." In some area of your life, in many areas of your life – more. It drives us to the point where we can no longer control it. We become workaholics or alcoholics or jogaholics or sexaholics. *Psychology Today* a few years ago wrote about a woman whose life is falling apart. Her nerves were shot. Her life is shot. Her health is shot. Her life is absolutely collapsing from too many all night parties and too much pot and too much booze and sexual encounters. A therapist asked her, "Why don't you stop?"

She responded, "You mean I don't have to do what I want to do? I don't have to do what I want to do? I don't have to be a slave of my desires?"

Let me ask you a personal question: why don't you stop doing what's killing you? Smoking too much or eating too much or vomiting up what you eat. Or using the internet in an illicit way or dating total losers. Why don't you stop? Why don't you stop buying what you don't need or stop grieving because you aren't complimented or acknowledged? You know why we don't stop? Because what Paul is saying here is true. We are enslaved.

Let me ask you another question. Can you say verses 1-3 about yourself without any limitations, without a bunch of weasel words – "Yes, but I am a pretty decent person over here and I really try hard. I may be a little addicted." But can you say verses 1-3 accurately and realistically described my life before I came to Christ or my life now whenever I try to live it apart from God.

This is not a harsh view of people. This is not overly pessimistic. The Bible is reality based. Verses 1-3 is living in reality. As you look in the mirror at your past, as you look at people living apart from God, or yourself apart from God, do you see verses 1-3 of Eph. 2 in the mirror? Dead person. Enslaved person. Person who just follows the world. Person who demands to have your needs met. Do you see that person? If you can't, then your eyes have not yet been opened by the Holy Spirit to your true condition. If you don't realize how deep a hole you are in, apart from God, then you are likely not yet a Christian.

If you resist and resent these kinds of things being said about you – I am no drunkard. I am no drug addict. You can't say all these things. If you resent and resist these words, then friend it is very probable that you are not yet a Christian. Because you need to acknowledge the depth of your problem before you can really cry out to Christ to save you.

So what is the answer the Bible gives to a world full of people who are dead and enslaved? The problem with people in the world is not that we are raised in dysfunctional families. Our problem is not economic. It is not that a certain political party was in charge and we just have to sweep out that old administration. The hole we are in is so much deeper than politics or economics.

What answer does the Bible give to people who are dead, enslaved and down in the pit? Does it say, "Climb out of the hole by yourselves, dead people."?

"Hey, dead man, shape up. Get into a good self-help program. Read this book. Listen to this tape. You need just a bit more education, dead man."

Can you imagine walking up to a corpse that is also tied up in ropes and saying, "There is a motivational speaker that I would like you to listen to."? The problem with being down in the pit, your problem, my problem defies a human solution. There is nothing that Washington can do to solve our real dilemma of verses 1-3. There is nothing George Bush or any of his aides can do to deal with verses 1-3.

What we need is something really radical. Something really powerful. More powerful than our lusts. More powerful than our desires for more. More powerful than Satan and, yes, than death.

And that's why verse 4 begins, ...*But God*. Paul is drawing a sharp contrast between what we are on our own, verse 1 *As for you...* and verse 4, ...*But God*. Unfortunately, the NIV totally blows the translation in verse 4 when it separates the word "but" from the word "God." In the NIV we read, *But because of his great love for us, God...* In the Greek, we read the two most powerful and hopeful words ever written put together, *But God...* The Bible is not only way more pessimistic about people's conditions than most of the world is. But it is way more optimistic regarding what you can become with God in your life than anyone in the world ever is. *But God* are two of the most hopeful words ever written.

Yes, I am a mess.

Yes, I am enslaved.

Yes, all you said about me is true.

But God...on my own I am dead, down here in this desert. But God made me alive. But God raised me up. But God seated me in heavenly places with Christ. Look at this. It should be translated, *But God who is rich in mercy because of his great love for us made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms.*

Again, can you say these words about yourself? But God, who is rich in mercy, he's the one who made me what I am. I acknowledge everything in verses 1-3 is true about me. But I acknowledge also that God has decisively broken into my life. I am not the same person I was. Can you say that? Can you say God lifted me out of the hole? God changed me. Yes, on my own I am a screw up, but God, who is rich in mercy, has taken me up to the mountaintop. Yes, I have failed and on my own I always fail. But God, who is rich in mercy, has rescued me, has set me free.

Are you able to say this with confidence to say this, friend, "Yes, I was that. But God has changed me. He has pulled me out of the pit."

And how did God do that? Does he walk up to a coffin and give a dead person a list of rules to obey? That's what a lot of people think becoming a Christian means. Well, I am trapped now, I am enslaved, I am miserable. And so God is just going to come up and give me a bunch of rules. I don't think that going up to a dead person and telling them, "Thou shalt not do this and thou shalt do this" is going to be all that helpful. The wonder of salvation is that God, who is very merciful, God who is so kind and tender to dead and enslaved people acts totally by his own initiative to make us alive and to set us free. Salvation is totally a work of God. It is all God's power. It is all God's mercy. God is the subject of verses 4-7, *But God made us alive and God raised us up and God seated us with him.*

Salvation from beginning to end is the work of God. The cable car pulls you on its own up the mountain. Yes, you make a decision. Yes, you pray the sinner's prayer. Yes, you come forward. Yes, you raise your hand. But the power, it's all God. It is like that cable car I described before. Yes, you choose to get on it, but nothing that Marlene was doing inside the car affected the car at all. The power of taking someone from death to life, it's all God.

And of course, it would have to be that way given our condition. And of course it would have to be that way given the height to which God wishes to take us. What does God do in making us alive? It says, *God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ.* What does he do?

Well, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he reaches down into our spiritually dead radio receivers, that dead receiver that I talked about before, and he switches it on. That's what it means to be born again. God comes into your spirit and he makes it alive. Suddenly the Bible is not a boring book anymore filled with ancient crazy stories. When you read it, you hear God speaking to you about something in your life.

Suddenly, you don't evaluate church the way you used to – do I like the music? How are people dressed? You are looking for something different. Is the Spirit of Jesus here? Am I being challenged here? Could I grow in this place? Is this a place where I could serve? Are they doing the will of Christ?

And you know, we are not only made alive. Paul says, even better than that, we are raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly realms with Christ Jesus. It is not just that you are made alive on the desert floor, but you are pulled up by the power of God to the top of the mountain. Raised up with Christ – what does that mean?

Here is where the great doctrine of union with Christ is expressed. Raised with Christ, seated with Christ – Paul is telling us that becoming a Christian is so much more than signing a card or praying a prayer or even being forgiven of your sins or being made alive. The cable car of salvation goes so much higher. What he is saying, and this is a great mystery, but through the Holy Spirit, when God makes you alive in this mysterious way, he joins your spirit to Christ's Spirit. You, Christian, are not just be some doctrine or some faith concept. But you Christian literally are joined to Jesus so that all that is true of Jesus becomes true of you.

The Bible uses lots of different ways to try to describe this truth. Jesus says in John 15, "I am the Vine, you are the branches." The life of Jesus, the life of the Vine, flows into the branches, back and forth. We are literally connected to Jesus. Paul tells us in several cases that we are connected to Christ as the members of the body are connected to its head. All of these different pictures are designed to communicate this mysterious spiritual truth that what is true of Jesus has become true of you.

Because you are connected to Jesus, when you have this *But God* experience, when God breaks into your life, you change. Your desires change. Your spiritual bent changes. You don't become smarter by being connected to Jesus. It is not as if you took an IQ test when you were down in the pit and it would be significantly lower than when God encounters you. It is not that you become more intelligent. But when the life of God flows into you, you have a different spiritual bent so you start using your intelligence in a different way.

Instead of using your intelligence to figure out how you can accumulate more stuff, how you can get the whole world to serve you. Instead of using your intelligence to manipulate others and make a case for your own goodness, you start using your own intelligence to serve others, to help other people. You begin to use your intelligence to learn the Bible. You use your intelligence to prepare a teaching. You use your intelligence to figure out ways to be a better witness and be a more effective Christian in your workplace.

As the life of Jesus flows into you like sap running into the branches, you start looking like Christ. You take on his giving nature. Before, the thought of tithing to a church was ridiculous. Why in the world would anyone ever give 10% of their income to some church? You have to be out of your mind. I need that money. But as Jesus' giving nature flows into you, it is very easy to fulfill the

biblical pattern of tithing to a local church. It is not an argument because you are changing.

The same thing is true in all of your attitudes. It is not that you have new capacities, but you have new bents. All of your capacities get bent and oriented toward Christ.

So let me ask you a couple of questions. As you look in the mirror can you say before God, "I know that verses 1-3 was true of me. I acknowledge that I was dead in sin. And that I was enslaved to this world and to Satan and to my own lusts. And I am still that way every time I turn my back on God and try to live apart from God."? Can you say that?

And can you go on to say, friend, that verses 4-6 are also true of you? "But God who is rich in mercy, out of his great love with which he loved me, made me spiritually alive. I am now spiritually alive and I am raised up with Christ." Can you say that? Have you moved from the pit to the mountaintop? Let's pray.

## **From the Pit to the Mountain Tops**

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Rich Nathan

February 10-11, 2001

"I Believe in the Church" Series

Ephesians 2:1-6

### **I. Down in the Valley**

A. We Were Dead (Eph. 2:1)

B. We Were Enslaved (Eph. 2:2, 3)

1. To the World

2. To Satan

3. To Our Lusts

### **II. Up in the Heavenlies**

A. How? But God... (Eph. 2:4)

B. What are We Now?

1. Made Alive (Eph. 2:5)

2. Raised with Christ (Eph. 2:6)