

Grace Alone

Ephesians 2.1-10

Some of the more interesting pieces of modern art are works like these,
the political posters that emerged
during the communist revolutions of the 20th century.

These works all seem to follow the same theme.
The focus is often on a hero,
sometimes a political leader, other times an everyday worker,
And the hero is gazing confidently into the future,
And they're often depicted with big muscles.

What's the message?
The message is one that glorifies humanity;
humanity in the form of the leader or of the worker.
It's a message that places the hope of a better future
in the hands of human society.
And it's of little wonder that this is the message of these posters,
because communism has no place for God.
It can only ever be left up to human society,
because human society is all that there is!

And it should be noted that in the west we can be guilty of the same thinking.
I'm picking on Barack Obama here,
And so to be fair I should add that misplaced confidence in humanity
has possibly reached its zenith as we've come to know his successor!

Misplaced trust in humanity is not just a political or cultural problem,
it's a human problem that emerges in every age, in every culture.
Which is one more reason why the Reformation of 500 years ago
was such a radical movement.

This is the second sermon in a series of four
that is exploring some of the big ideas that emerged in the reformation,
and we've made a commitment in this series
to highlight the points of difference
between the Protestant churches that were born at his time
and the Roman Catholic church that continues to this day.

But while today's topic, that salvation is born out of God's *grace alone*,
does have something to say about this difference between churches,
it's a topic that highlights a much bigger divide that exists in our world:
the division between those who would glorify humanity above all else,
and those who would recognise the very real need that humans have
for divine intervention.

Is it possible for us humans to save ourselves?
The clear answer that the reformation gave was 'no',

and that's because this is the answer the reformers saw in the Bible, especially in passages like Ephesians 2:1-10.

And as we look at this passage

it's also worth saying that this isn't just about politics.

It's also about how we view ourselves.

That we exist as people in desperate need of god's help is something that on one hand challenges human pride, but on the other hand offers great comfort

to those who don't need reminding about their human weakness.

That God acts for us *completely* is just one of the life-giving truths that the reformation established for us.

And so let's turn now to Ephesians 2,

and within the first 10 verses in this chapter

I detect three movements, as it were,

the first comprising verses 1-3

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² 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. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

Some of you would be familiar with the work of Jane Austin,

and in particular

you may be familiar with the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*,

her most famous novel: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."

A few years back an updated version of Austin's novel,

some would say a new and improved version of Austin's novel appeared in our book stores: *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*

What Seth Grahame-Smith, the author, has done

is that he's taken Jane Austin's classic and reworked it, introducing some new members to the cast:

characters taken from the realm of the living dead.

I'll give you the gist:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a a zombie in possession of brains must be in want of more brains. Never was this truth more plain than during the recent attacks at Netherfield Park, in which a household of eighteen was slaughtered and consumed by a horde of the living dead.

"My dear Mr Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield park is occupied again?"

Mr Bennet replied that he had not and went about his morning business of dagger sharpening and musket polishing—for attacks by the unmentionables had grown alarmingly frequent I recent weeks.

Maybe we could re work the Bible in the same way.

Jesus walking through the crowd,

when a Zombie reached out and grabbed his cloak,

so he turns around, and throws his axe!

But perhaps Paul's already done a similar thing here in our passage!

The ESV, I think is a little more accurate when it renders vs 1 and 2 this way: And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.

Paul has this picture of the living dead.

He's describing people who are living, people who are walking around,

But spiritually they're dead:

there's no spiritual life to them,

there's nothing connecting them to God,

there's no holy spirit dwelling within them.

The causes of this death are threefold, Paul describes them in verse 2 and 3 where he speaks about the *world*, the *devil* and our *own flesh*

The *world* we live is constantly telling us to turn away from God and to live life independently, to live life centred on our own selves.

And the *devil* — described here as 'the ruler of the kingdom of the air' — is always putting temptations before us, causing us to turn from God's ways.

And finally we ourselves harbour our own desires to turn from God.

Paul speaks of the 'cravings of the flesh',

which is his way of describing

our constant desire to satisfy ourselves rather than God.

So this is how we become Zombies:

The world, the devil and our own sin all combine

to turn us into the living dead.

And it's an experience that no-one is immune to.

Did you note Paul's words in verse 3? *All of us* also lived among them at one time.

I think Paul's observation here makes a lot of sense of the world.

Despite the best intentions of our political systems,

humans still take advantage of one another;

it seems that the great strength displayed in some of those posters

isn't always employed in *service* of others but at the *expense* of others.

And what do you do with a Zombie?

Why was Mr Bennet busy with his dagger sharpening and musket polishing?

Because Zombies need to be destroyed, that's what you do to Zombies!

And the sobering news from Paul is that God has the same response

to those who are walking as the spiritually dead.

Look at the end of verse 3: Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

When God sees that we listen to the world instead of him;

When he sees that we allow our own desires to rule us;

Then his righteous and just anger is aroused,

and that anger ends in our judgment and destruction.

If the story were to end there then it would be a very depressing sermon tonight.
 But Paul doesn't end there.
 While the sight of the spiritually dead arouses God's anger,
 Paul concludes that it also arouses his love and compassion.
 God loves the Zombie. He loves the Zombie!

Verses speaking of God's judgment can be turn off when considering the Bible,
 but we need to remember the full spectrum of God's emotions,
 and they come into view from verse 4:
 But ... because of his *great love* for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ
 even when we were dead in transgressions.

*God takes the spiritual Zombie
 and brings them from the land of the living-dead
 to the land of the living.*

How does he do this?
 Paul tells us that he makes us alive *with Christ*, that he raises us *with Christ*.
 Jesus is the one who resisted the world, the devil and his own temptations.
 Jesus was the one who perfectly praised God, thanked God and obeyed God.
 Jesus was the one who dies and was raised again to cleanse us from sin
 And Jesus shares this spiritual life,
 which he was able to achieve,
 with those who ask him.

And *why* is this offered to us?
 Paul says its because God loves us.
 God is merciful, and he loves us Zombies,
 and so through Jesus we're made alive again.

It's got nothing to do with what we can achieve.
 After all, what can a dead person do that's of any benefit to themselves?
 An illustration I've heard just recently
 is that we each are like people trapped under a building
 that's collapsed in an earthquake.
 You barely have any room to move,
 and given the cold and lack of water and lack of food,
 you're in your tomb and there's nothing you can do.
 But then you hear a faint voice filtering down from outside
 "Is anyone down there?" And so you yell back "yes! Yes ! I'm here!"
 and so your rescuers dig down and pull you up
 from what would have been certain death!
 Help must come from the outside, and if it does, then you'll live!

And this help is offered solely because of God's love and good will,
 There's nothing inherently attractive about a Zombie –
 Generally speaking you don't find them staring in romantic comedies,
 you find them in horror films.

People don't fall in love with zombies, they throw axes!

And likewise there's nothing inherently attractive about us that draws God's love

We heard this in our OT reading,

Moses says to the OT nation of Israel

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you. (Deut 7.7-8)

This is why Paul calls our salvation out of death an act of *grace* in vs 5.

Grace is one of these Biblical words people aren't always familiar with

But an act of grace is a wonderfully generous action

bestowed on an undeserving person.

Spiritually dead people deserve destruction.

The reaction they ought to create is a reaction of horror.

But God offers them love. He showers us with his grace.

And it's a grace that's ongoing.

Verse 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the *coming ages* he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

God's plan is to keep on blessing us with the gift of salvation,

his plan is for his grace to continue on for all eternity.

It's at this point that we note one of the big distinctions

between Protestant faith and Roman Catholicism.

This was a distinction that we spoke at length about last week.

Like us Protestants, the Roman Catholic church teaches

that salvation is impossible without God's outside help.

In fact, the earthquake illustration was one that I stole from a Catholic book!

But that same book goes on to say that once you're pulled out of the rubble,

then it's up to you to make sure your life of good works keeps you safe.

Last week we described a huge game of snakes and ladders: up and down.

This is what life is like in the catholic system.

But Paul says the grace expressed in Jesus Christ is a grace for *all* ages,

Christ rescues us from the rubble

and ensures that from that point

our clothes are free from even the tiniest speck of dust!

For it is by grace you have been saved, Paul writes in verse 8 through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Now, if you've understood the idea of grace correctly

another question quickly follows.

If our salvation is conferred upon us despite anything we do ourselves,

then why live a godly life at all?

The answer is in verse 10.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

God created us with good works in mind;
 We're designed to be obedient to his commands.
 But our salvation is never dependent upon how well we obey.

Our pet dog Harvey turns 6 next month. That's how long we've had him.
 And why is it that we got a dog? Partly for company, Partly for exercise.
 And does he fulfill those roles? Sometimes.
 Sometimes he goes off on his own and doesn't want to be bothered,
 sometimes on a walk he's so slow, sniffing at each and every tree
 so that it's pointless exercise for either of us actually.
 We had people over for a BBQ yesterday,
 and as I was cooking the burgers I put them down next to me on a step
 and when I picked them up again, three were missing.
 But is he going anywhere? No way.
 He became ours the moment he came home
 and despite his behavior he'll remain ours.
 He will be disciplined, and I will train him to behave differently,
 to fulfill more of the tasks that should be his.
 but the bumps in that process aren't any reason to be rid of him.

And so it is with us and our master, as it were.
 By grace we enter into his family and by grace we stay in his family,
 while he trains us to do the good works he would have us do.

This was the great truth that Luther rediscovered 500 years ago,
 and you can see why it's not only a truth
 that challenges the idea of humanity's glory,
 but why it's a truth that encourages those who know all too well
 how inglorious they are.
 It's a truth that I learnt when I was 18 years of age.

It's funny the things you find when you search through some old files
 Here's a blurb about myself from when I was 18 years of age

Hobbies: skiing and scuba-diving
Favourite book of the bible: Philippians, full of motivating one-liners
Mc Donalds pickles? Yes
Full Name: Martin Scott Kemp
Preferred Name: Marty
Section: Keenites
Year on Mission: 1st
Home Church: St Johns Parramatta
If God returned today I would: go to heaven (I hope)
Exclusive Mission behaviour: get up early and eat a full breakfast
With the world's attention for one minute I would tell them: to stop being selfish
Hobbies: be with friends
Favourite book of the bible: Philippians, very encouraging
Mc Donalds pickles? Yes
Full Name: Johnathon Pak Hung Lam
Preferred Name: Jon
Section: Theos

"If God returned today I would: go to heaven (I hope)"

And that wasn't a confident hope, I was unsure.
 I had trusted in Christ before then,
 but I just wasn't sure that salvation was really by grace.
 My fear was that my imperfect life would undo any grace that I'd received

I would have made a great Catholic.

But also in that year I did a course at church in Reformation Church History,
And I read about Luther,
and as I learnt about his great discovery, I discovered the same thing myself.
Salvation really is all about God's action and not our own.
It really is all about Grace alone.

Let me lead us in prayer.