

“By Grace We Have Been Saved”

Ephesians 2:1-11

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My first real engagement with today’s passage in Ephesians was in our first church in Norfolk, where we led a Bible study on this passage. I remember groaning at this passage, which seemed to reflect the same old violent, white Southern theology that I grew up with: “I am dead in my trespasses”— I am terrible, and God is violently angry at me and wants to kill me, but Jesus Christ took the punishment for me instead, and I am saved.” I also wondered about the “primitive” nature of this passage. Who in the world is “the prince of the power of the air”? The devil? Someone else?

The first part of today’s passage does sound like it comes right out of Southern white Christianity, so bound to an angry God and to violence and domination. It gets to death right off: “You were *dead* through your trespasses and sins.” For the first 3 verses of today’s passage, the author of Ephesians pounds on the Gentiles, using phrases like “trespasses and sin,” “disobedient,” “passions of the flesh,” “children of wrath,” “power of the prince of the air.” Then in verse 4, the author shifts. Having beaten us down into the fires of hell, we are lifted back up, through God’s great love: “By grace you have been saved.” Even though we are captive to death, God is rescuing us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, even as we seem to be under control of the power of the prince of the air.

I want to look at this passage today to unpack its meaning for us. I want to look first at the nature of our captivity under the “power of the prince of the air.” In using this phrase, the author of Ephesians is likely thinking of a personality, a being like the devil, but that is a difficult concept for modern ears. Whether we believe in the devil or not, though, we must not lose sight of the wisdom that is here in this metaphor.

I grew up being “schooled” in sin, learning that the important sins and trespasses were personal and individual: anxiety, lust, greed, envy, sloth—and that these could be conquered and defeated by trusting in God and by strengthening my will. “Buck up, Nibs, and get your willpower going and growing!” But as I grew to be a young adult, I began to discover a deeper level of sin in my life, a much more difficult level. It was tough enough to deal with my “personal” sins, but now I began to discover a more profound and troubling level of sin: sexism and materialism and racism and homophobia and domination, to name just a few.

My discovery of this deep level of sinfulness led to a whole new level of struggle in my heart and mind, and I began to reconsider the sophistication of this phrase, “the power of the prince of the air.” The author of Ephesians recognizes our *caught-ness*, our captivity to the very powers that make us hurt ourselves and hurt others and hurt God. I learned that I had grown up in a river of racism and sexism and materialism and homophobia and militarism. And the sophistication of the phrase “power of the prince of the air” is that it recognizes that the magnetic pull of these forces comes through those whom we love and trust.

I learned all of these forces not just from “bad” people, but from really decent people who were trying to teach me how to live, indeed how to survive. This idea of the

“prince of the air” recognizes that we breathe this stuff into our perceptual apparatus and into our imaginations. But we have to breathe in order to live, so this idea of the “power of the prince of the air” reminds us that the life-sustaining air brings us life and death. The Supper Club just finished discussing Jim Grimsley’s book *How I Shed My Skin*. It is a white man’s memoir about his childhood in the segregated South.

In particular, I was raised to keep black people in their place, and to see to it that they stayed there. My purpose here and now is to examine how good people perpetuated this in the raising of their children and in the living of their lives in my part of the South. Or, to be more personal, my purpose here is to examine how, as a child, I learned bias against black people from the good white people around me. For there is no one else from whom I could have taken this lesson.¹

In his book, he indicates that there was no particular time when he took classes in white supremacy or male domination. He simply “breathed” it in under the power of the prince of the air. Long before we know it, long before we have any idea about it, we allow the fallen powers of the world to define us and to define others.

From early on, we learn that girls and women are mainly bodies for men.

From early on, we learn that the purpose of men is to dominate.

From early on, we learn that white people are superior; all others are inferior.

From early on, we learn that money is what brings us life.

From early on, we learn that guns and violence bring peace and security.

From early on, we learn that gay and lesbian people are abnormal and even abhorrent.

And as I discovered how much I believed in white supremacy and male domination and the centrality of money and the redemptive power of violence, I began to see a bit of movement in my relationship to this passage in Ephesians. While I recognize that I had these powers—“the power of the prince of the air”—deeply embedded in me, I thought like a lot of white liberals do, that I could shuck them off much as I used to shuck corn on our back porch to get the leaves off. Then just like the ear of corn, the real me, the gleaming one, would shine forth.

But I also had to remember that in shucking the corn, I would often find a corn worm that had burrowed its way deep into the corn itself, and that part of the corn had to be cut off or even the entire ear of corn thrown away. It was only in coming to be pastor at Oakhurst that I began to discover how deeply race and racism has affected and infected my life, and then I began to “get it,” to understand the meaning of the first verses of today’s passage, of “the power of the prince of the air.”

It has also helped me to comprehend the idea of “children of wrath.” In 2010, we saw the rise of the Tea Party, the voice of mostly white people who spoke up in anger and wrath. We are seeing that voice rise again in response to Donald Trump’s candidacy. There is a deep, visceral reaction as the categories of power are challenged just a little bit: a black president, women’s leadership, immigration, healthcare for more people, a movement towards equity for gay and lesbian people. These steps to expand leadership and share power outside the circle of white men has led to a deep feeling of wrath. In this movement, I’ve begun to “feel” this passage in Ephesians with its emphasis on being dead, on being children of wrath. And it is scary.

But I've also had to remember that this passage doesn't end at verse 3. It makes a dramatic shift in verses 4-5: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." Just as I've been forced by this passage to reconsider the nature of sin, I've also been motivated to reconsider the nature of God—because I grew up with an angry, violent God, a white male god ready and even eager to use violence to keep order, the God who preferred to kill his own Son rather than to allow the power of love to redeem and liberate me and all other humans who were lost in captivity. And so, as I re-read this letter to the Ephesians, I rediscovered an alternate view of God here, a God not centered on wrath and violence and death, but rather a God presented to us in the *Beloved*.

When we looked at the beginning of Ephesians, the author refers to Jesus Christ as "the Beloved." "He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." It is the only time in the Bible that this word *Beloved* is used for Jesus Christ. This passage in Ephesians emphasizes over and over again the love of God. We are being asked to switch from the angry, punishing, violent God to the Beloved, who is rich in mercy.

The author of Ephesians reminds us that God doesn't intend for us to remain under the control of "the power of the prince of the air": that God doesn't intend for us to remain in the morass of captivity. God intends for us to move towards liberation and love. The author states that "God is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us." The Greek word used for "rich" here means very, very rich so we can imagine the depth of God's mercy for us. The word *mercy* comes from an Old Testament word *hesed*, which means "lovingkindness." It means the same kind of commitment that a mother has for a child whom she loves. The author of Ephesians asserts that God is not only bending towards us in Jesus Christ, but that God is also *moving* into our lives, seeking us out, calling to us, longing for us to live our lives based in love and not in fear and anxiety and captivity and domination.

The author emphasizes that we are asked to hear this great news, and he describes our response as "by grace you have been saved by faith." Here he emphasizes that our lives are a gift, that our ability to love is a gift, and that we are asked to believe that *we are loved*. By *saved*, he is not talking so much about getting into heaven when we die but rather re-orienting our lives from being centered on fear and death and meaninglessness to being centered on gratitude and love and justice. As our author puts it in verse 4, "God made us come alive in Christ." I remember many moments in my own life where I discovered how captured I am to the powers—and in these moments, I felt a great gift of release, of liberation, as I began to re-discover my own humanity and the humanity of others. I began to *come alive*, just a little bit.

"By grace you have been saved by faith" is a phrase that our author uses four times in one way or another in this passage. The emphasis on our faith at the end of the phrase is not so much an action on our part as it is a re-orientation, a decision to try to believe that God loves us, that we are loved, and that we, too, are asked to live in love.

The author of Ephesians emphasizes that we are mired in captivity, deeper than we had ever imagined. But the author also stresses that the Beloved is offering us love and liberation and a way out. We are asked to hear about this offer, to seek to

believe it, and to seek to live it out. The rest of this letter to the Ephesians is a guide to shifting our lives from wrath and captivity to love and liberation, and as we all know, it is no easy journey. As the momma put it to her son in Langston Hughes's powerful poem "Mother to Son," "Well, son, I'll tell you, life for me ain't been no crystal stair—it's had tacks in it and splinters and boards torn up."²

It ain't no crystal stair, but let's try it out a bit this week and in the weeks to come. Get up each day and seek to start in gratitude for the day and for our lives. For what are we grateful? If we are not grateful, what is preventing us? Anxiety, resentment, depression, injustice, violence? And let us seek to find the voice of the Beloved to move into our blockage, to help us move from anxiety and wrath to love and mercy and gratitude.

"By grace you have been saved through faith." The Beloved wants us to find the power of love. May we hear Her voice and know that power.

Notes

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1 Jim Grimsley, *How I Shed My Skin: Unlearning the Racist Lessons of a Southern Childhood* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2015), 74-75.

2 Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: Knopf, 2004), 30.