

But God...

Jean Jacques Rousseau writes, “Falsehood has an infinity of combinations, but truth has only one mode of being” (The Shack, W.P. Young, p. 183).

In this text from Ephesians, Paul presents us the hopeless “before Christ” picture of humanity. “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you lived,” he bluntly states, “following the course of the world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now among those who are disobedient” (v.3). Or, the Chuck Carlson translation, “You thumbed your nose at God, tromping up and down every street, alley, and byway in an ‘infinity of combinations’, blazing your own path, taking your cues from the multitudinous influences that fed into your religion of the sovereign self. The end result? Spiritual death.”

As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it” (Matthew 7:13).

So where does that leave us? When we keep butting up against dead ends in the endless pursuit of the sovereign self, when we can’t seem to find peace or love as we explore the various paths that promise so much and deliver so little, what do we do? And how are we to avoid the anger of God as we go about our destructive ways?

Notice two pivotal words in the text at verse 4. “But God...” But God, what? But God gave us what we deserved and consigned us to hell? But God, sick and tired of the whole mess, blasted us to kingdom come? No. “But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses...(Rich in mercy? Loving us even when we were deader than dead in our sins?)

But God. But God, knowing we were mired in an “infinity of falsehoods” and therefore dead to love, “made us alive together with Christ”- the one mode of being – and, as if that weren’t enough, “raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places.”

This “after Christ” picture Paul draws has absolutely nothing to do with what we did but everything to do with the nature of God. It’s called Grace. Of course we can’t take credit for this. Of course we did nothing to earn it. While we were busy trying on every sin imaginable, Christ died for us.

St. Augustine of the 5th century was certainly a master when it came to trying on every sin imaginable. There was a reason his mother Monica spent thirty plus years praying for him. He drank to excess, had an illegitimate son, engaged in numerous illicit relationships, pursued diverse non-Christian religious beliefs, and repeatedly wounded his mother’s heart with his selfishness. And it was he who, after his conversion to Christ observed that “the human race is inquisitive about other people’s lives, but negligent to correct their own.” (Confessions, p180)

But what was it that broke through Augustine's self-defenses and self-admitted ignorance? "The heart" he writes, "is aroused in the love of your mercy and the sweetness of your grace, by which every weak person is given power, while dependence on grace produces awareness of one's own weakness" (p. 180)

Secure in God's love, no longer driven by the anxiety of performance, we find ourselves open to the changes God wants to make in us- we can give up our tiny self-referenced lives and step into the infinite territory of unconditional love.

In the popular novel '*The Shack*', the protagonist, Mackenzie, who has suffered the cruel murder of his young daughter converses with God, pouring out his anger and hurt. Nothing makes sense; Mackenzie lives each minute of the day with, 'The Great Sadness.'

At a crucial point in the conversation, the God character, Papa, says to Mackenzie, "You really don't understand yet. You try to make sense of the world in which you live based on a very small and incomplete picture of reality. It is like looking at a parade through the tiny knothole of hurt, pain, self-centeredness, and power, and believing you are on your own and insignificant. All of these contain powerful lives. You see pain and death as ultimate evils and God as the ultimate betrayer, or perhaps, at best, as fundamentally untrustworthy. You dictate the terms and judge my actions and find me guilty... The real underlying flaw in your thinking, Mackenzie, is that you don't think that I'm good. If you knew that I was good and that everything- the means, the ends, and all the processes of individual lives- is all covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me. But you don't... Because you do not know that I love you, you cannot trust me. (William B. Young, *The Shack*, p. 180)

Grace is God's predisposition towards every one of us. The Greek word meaning 'saved', in verse 8, indicates what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do for us. As Paul continues in verse 10, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." We are made not only to be objects of God's love, but to be agents, to be carriers of that same love. In other words, all life is grounded in God's initiative; all life is created for love.

But how do we get to this place of trust, this place of assurance of God's love? How do we exchange our puny little lives of fear and anxiety, of doubt and cynicism for a life of love, forgiveness and freedom?

Back to Mackenzie. In response to God's affirmation of His love and trustworthiness and challenge to Mackenzie's lack of trust, Mackenzie retorts, "I don't know how to change that." God's response: "You can't, not alone, but together we will watch the change take place. For now I just want you to be with me and discover that our relationship is not about performance or your having to please me. I'm not a bully, not some self-centered demanding deity insisting on my own way. I am good, and I desire only what is best for you. You can't find that through guilt or condemnation, or coercion, only through a relationship of love. And I do love you."

A relationship of love- God and Adam, God and Eve, walking and talking in the garden. God and Abraham, God and Sarah, walking and talking on the way to a new land. God and you, God and me, walking and talking through every aspect of our lives. It's what we're made for. It doesn't get better than this.

Be with me. “God’s invitation to be in relationship with the lover of the universe, to step into the reality of mercy, grace, and love. To trade death for life. We enter into that reality here at Christ’s table. Let us join together.