

On Display

by Ray C. Stedman

In Paul's great letter to the Ephesians, we are attempting to understand the underlying realities of life and of faith. In the opening words of the second chapter we looked at the condition which lies behind all the difficulties and problems we have in life the state into which mankind has fallen, and how desperately hopeless it is apart from the redeeming work of Jesus Christ.

This is election week, and once again we are hearing all the promises of the political parties, each one saying it is the ultimate hope for redemption here in the United States, and that if we but elect the right candidate, we can count on having all our economic problems solved, all our international conflicts resolved, all our taxes lowered, etc. Yet, we've heard all this many, many times. By experience we know that though it is right to examine the issues, though there are differences between candidates, and though it is perfectly proper and important for us to vote, nevertheless, no political party is going to solve the problems. They are going to be with us yet, because the condition is deeper than politics.

Then we looked at what happens when a man or woman turns to Jesus Christ, the new condition which is introduced – absolutely, fundamentally different, and described for us in these terms: "... even when we were dead through our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus," {Eph 2:5-6 RSV}. We tried to grasp what that means and how essential it is to approach life on that basis.

Now, beginning with Verse 7, we look beyond our present experience to the future which lies ahead of us. The apostle says that God has done all this,

that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. {Eph 2:7-10 RSV}

Immediately Paul explores **the purpose of God in redeeming mankind.**

Why does he come into our lives? Why does he change the fundamental basis of our experience? Why is it that he has raised us up with Christ and made us sit together with him in heavenly places? Well, his answer is that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. In other words, God's purpose in doing all this is that he might have a display case in which his own grace – the glory of his character and being – can become evident.

Yesterday my family and I went to the De Young Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Along with many other citizens of this area, we visited the Norman Rockwell exhibit of paintings. It was a delightful experience. I have long enjoyed his paintings – especially when they appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* for so many years. Many of the originals of those *Post* covers were in this exhibit. It was a rich slice of Americana spread before us. Each of those paintings is an exhibition of the skill of the artist and of his ability to capture some passing mood, some look, some situation which would evoke either humor or a sense of nostalgia. I stood before one picture and laughed out loud, it was so funny. Another almost brought me to tears. It was a vivid

display of the ability of the artist to contribute richly to the enjoyment of all who viewed his pictures.

This is exactly the thought the apostle has in mind here. God is going to put us on display, he says. Each one of us will be a vivid demonstration of the grace and the perfection of God's character. The glory of his Person will be visible in us throughout the coming ages – especially as it is manifested, says Paul, by his kindness toward us. This is what will make it stand out and be so meaningful to other people – the evidence of the kindness of God toward us.

If you want to know more of what this kindness consists of, you need only take a concordance and trace this word through the Scriptures. You will find, for instance, that it is used to refer to the goodness of God to us as reflected in natural life. The fourteenth chapter of the book of Acts records that the Apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas preached to the people in Lystra. Among other things, Paul said these words:

In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. {Acts 14:16-17 RSV}

Before long it will be Thanksgiving. I hope every family, and each individual, stops and gives thanks to God for his goodness in nature, for the abundance of supply given to us in this richly favored land of ours. It is right that we should, because this is a mark of God's kindness toward us. Paul argues further along this line in the second chapter of Romans. He says to the pagan world, "Do you presume upon the riches of his [God's] kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" {Rom 2:4 RSV}. That is, it is designed to make you think about the God who loves you enough to supply your needs and to fill your life with richness of food and shelter and clothing and all the other things God has given us. Do you stop to think about where all this comes from, and who it is that gives it to you? This is beautifully reflected in the spirit of that first Thanksgiving, when the Pilgrim fathers stopped to give thanks. Even in the midst of poverty, distress, and threats

to their very lives, they gave thanks that God had abundantly blessed them.

But this kindness isn't confined to natural blessings; it is also redemptive. This same word appears in the letter to Titus, where Paul says, "After the kindness and love of God, our Savior, toward man appeared, he saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit," {cf, Tit 3:4-5 RSV}. All this is meant to set forth for us the way God works in our lives.

Do you ever stop to think about these things – beyond Thanksgiving Day, that is?

Do you wake up every morning to give thanks for the food, the clothing, the shelter, and all the other things God has given to you?

According to the apostle all this has just begun – God has just started to give. He has not yet poured it out upon us to the full degree by any means. His program, Paul says, is to manifest in abundance the riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through the coming ages. If you read a passage like that without stopping to think a little bit, you'll miss the full impact of this truth. You ought to ponder what that means. How long is an age? Well, according to the Scriptures, there have been only two ages in the history of man, so far. One was the age from Adam to the Flood of Noah. The other is the age from the Flood to the present day. It will end at the coming again of the Lord Jesus, when another age will begin. But according to this passage in Ephesians, God has in mind many ages yet to come. You'll notice that the word is in the plural: "in the coming ages." How long will that be? Well, who can say what is in the heart and mind of God? But what the passage does declare to us is that God has in mind far more extensive possibilities in the future than anything we have ever dreamed of before.

We have already tasted only a mere "trickle" of his grace, yet it is so rich and abundant that it blows all the fuses of our understanding when it begins to dawn on us what we already have. And here Paul says it will increase on and on into the future, that in the coming ages God might demonstrate his kindness. I hope this helps you to grasp something of the majestic greatness of the God with whom we have to do, the God who has already so richly blessed our lives. If you have experienced anything of what it means to be made alive in Christ, to be raised up with him, you know how

rich your life has become already. But that is just the beginning. It is to go on into the coming ages.

This is true not only of his redemptive kindness, but of his natural kindness as well. It always “blows my mind” when I begin to think about this. It is so fantastic in its possibilities that Scripture gives us no more than the briefest hints about it, lest we become so caught up with this that it is all we will think about. But there are certain passages in the Scriptures which hint about some of the possibilities ahead for us in the realm of nature, in the world of physical experience – references to the new heavens and new earth, to a resurrected body, equipped to meet the demands of the human spirit in ways such as we have never known or dreamed of before. Certain passages scattered here and there seem to set this forth for us, to tantalize us with the great possibilities that lie ahead in Jesus Christ.

I have always been interested in astronomy, and I’m fascinated to read about the enormous telescopes like those near here on Mt. Hamilton, or on Palomar Mountain in Southern California. They are stuck right in the front window of the Father’s house! When I look into the heavens and think of the vast reaches of the universe, the innumerable whirling galaxies that float out there in space, it is inconceivable to me that God would create this far-flung universe, using an amount of material inconceivable in its immensity, without the purpose of developing it further. The Scriptures certainly suggest that, in the coming ages, we who have found Jesus Christ and are learning how to operate according to ways God himself is teaching us – learning how to walk and live by faith and to operate by dependence upon his life – shall have set before us fantastic possibilities of development. We may conquer worlds perhaps already occupied – who knows? (I believe the Scriptures indicate that there are other beings in the universe.) Paul does not detail them for us here, but he hints that God has some immense possibilities for us. In these coming ages, age upon age, there will be tremendous work to do, and tremendous equipment with which to do it. God will constantly be increasing the display in us of his kindness.

I must leave it there, but I suggest that this concept merits considerable study.

One thing this passage does make clear – it reveals in proper perspective the puniness of our present experience. If your thinking is bounded only

by the womb and the tomb, what a brief span of life you are engaged in, what piddling possibilities you are concerned with! God has far greater prospects ahead, and the believer is to lift his eyes from this present experience. Our present life might not always be what we’d like it to be. In fact, we are guaranteed that it won’t be. But it is merely the beginning, the start toward immeasurable possibilities which lie beyond. Robert Browning’s little rhyme takes on new meaning in light of a passage like this. He says,

Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be
The last of life for
Which the first was made.

We are learning now, in this age, in order that we might be prepared to display the greatness of God’s glory in the coming ages.

Next Paul brings **the basis for all this** before us again. He never lets us forget why and how this can be:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. {Eph 2:8-9 RSV}

This is what makes it all possible. Just think of it! It has already been done. Notice the tense of the verb: “you have been saved.” This refers back to the three-fold relationship set forth previously in this series:

- We have been made alive in Christ.
- We have been given a new identity.
- We are no longer what we once were.
- We are no longer associated with Adam; we are in Christ, and Christ is our life.
- We face every day, every moment, no longer as a child of a fallen condition, but as a son of the living God.

I cannot stress enough how important that is to remember! It will make all the difference in the

world as to whether you approach life feeling inadequate, guilty, rejected, and lonely, or whether you are filled with confidence, certainty, acceptance, love and warmth. It will make all the difference in the world as to how you begin each day, and how you think of yourself before God. This is of such vital importance because the truth is, as psychologists tell us, that if you don't see yourself as a worthwhile person, accepted before God and of great importance to him, then you can not see anyone else that way. You will begin to demand performance of others in order to accept them. You will not be able to forgive others. You will be caught up in a web of perfectionism in which you are constantly feeling guilty yourself – because you don't live up to your own ideals.

What delivers you from that are tremendous facts set forth here? We have a new identity in Jesus Christ, a new power. We are raised up together with him. His power is available to us in the simplicity of the ordinary circumstances of our lives. God himself is present, and is releasing through us – in ways we can not feel but nevertheless are true – his life, a touch of heaven upon our earthly condition. And we can enter into a new attitude. We are made to sit together with him in heavenly places in Christ. That is, we are to rest in him, to relax and let him carry the load, and to be freed from strain, anxiety, and fear of what the outcome will be. It is his responsibility to work it out.

If you are thinking of these facts as mere theological doctrines, how far astray you have gone! These are realities which make the difference as to how life is lived, what your days are like, and what your tomorrows will be. The basis, Paul reminds us, is all there; it has all been accomplished. The whole of your future development, not only in this age but in the ages to come, rests upon a foundation which already has been laid. God is not going to add another thing to it. He does not need to do another thing for you beyond what he has already done. He will simply help you to work out your life, day by day, on the basis of understanding what has already happened.

This saves you from the silly running around after every new theological fad that comes along, every new book that comes out, every new tape that is issued, every new program that comes along, and thinking you need to have some vast new experience which will change your whole life. No, no. You need only grasp and understand more fully,

and then put into practice, the riches of God's grace already provided for you in Jesus Christ. All the advance of your spiritual life rests upon that.

Notice that Paul stresses the fact that you had nothing to do with this. You and I did not add to this at all. This is God's activity. We didn't originate it; it is not our own doing. We couldn't have come up with this redemptive program by which, in a very real sense, we have died. Man never plans to die; he plans to live. Death is what he fears most. Yet God has worked out a way by which our old life can end, can die, can be put aside. We never could have thought that up. But God did. So it is not of our doing. And it is not of our deserving. We have no merit here. It is not of works, Paul says. We cannot earn it. It is all of grace. It is given to us, day by day, from the hand of God.

This is in order that man may never boast. Do you know what boasting is? It is deceiving yourself. Boasting is pretending you are something you are not. When you boast you are saying, "I'm my own creator, my own god. I have in myself what it takes to handle life. Nobody contributes to me. I am sufficient in myself." That is what we really mean when we boast. But this is a lie, because we are not self-sufficient. Each one of us is a dependent creature. We cannot live a moment without somebody else's love, without somebody else's acceptance, somebody else's understanding. Life turns dull and bleak and barren and gray and drab without the relationships we have with others. When we forget we are dependent creatures, lie to ourselves about it, and boast about what we have done and how much we have been able to accomplish, we are only deceiving ourselves.

God never allows self-deception to stand. God is an utter realist. He deals with life exactly as it is. So he says that all you and I can contribute is to receive his grace, simply take it, moment by moment accept relationship with him, utilize the power he makes available to us, and rest in the fantastic fact that he will solve all the riddles which arise, so as to accomplish the ends he has promised.

Boasting in your faith would be like boasting in the fact that you reached out to take a check from somebody. Suppose you have a tremendous debt but someone offers to pay it for you, writes out a check for you for \$500,000. And you reach out and take it from him. How absurd it would be if you then went around saying to everybody, "Isn't it wonderful that I had what it took to reach out and

grab that check?" They might say to you, "Wasn't it marvelous that he paid that debt for you?" If you said, "Oh, he didn't do anything much; I took the check. After all, if I hadn't taken it, what good would it have done for him to give it in the first place?" – if you directed all the attention and solicited all the praise and glory for the hand that reached out to take the check – how silly that would be! It is the resources of God which make all this possible. It is the greatness of God which supplies this richness of grace to our lives.

So the apostle goes on now to show us **its ultimate manifestation:**

We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
{Eph 2:10 RSV}

Notice how careful he is to put "works" in the right place. You don't obtain anything from God by working for it. You never deserve anything but judgment at his hand. If he gave us what we deserve, we would all end up in Hell. No. We receive his grace, his mercy, his love. But this results in good works. That is the point. It is designed to produce good works. It is a marvelous manifestation of God's ability.

The word translated "workmanship" is really the word *poem*. "We are his poem." Or, if you like, perhaps it would be better rendered, "We are his masterpiece." God is working out in our lives a tremendous exhibition and demonstration of his wisdom, his power, his love, his life, his character, his peace, and his joy. He is teaching us, training us, bringing us along, applying the paint in exactly the right places, producing a marvelous masterpiece to be put on display. This is to result in good works: kindness, love, mercy, compassion, help to one another, meeting one another's needs.

Paul says that God has prepared these works beforehand. I experienced an interesting illustration of this in Albuquerque last week. Brian Burgess, one of our interns, went there with me. We decided, as the plane was coming in for the landing, that we would have some prayer together there on the plane. I hadn't talked to Brian about this passage at all, but I was struck by the way he prayed. He said,

"Father, thank you for the good works already prepared for us in Albuquerque, for the fact

that they are waiting for us to step into them and experience them."

This is exactly what this passage is saying. God has already prepared some works for you to do. As you walk in the Spirit, he will lead you to them. When you enter into them they will always be works of blessing, of help, of strengthening toward others.

Sure enough, after we got to Albuquerque these began to unfold:

- There was a missionary there from the Amazon region of South America who was discouraged and terribly upset, ready to quit the ministry. Through the ministry we had there he came alive and began to see again what God could do. He came to us with a light on his face and said, "I'm going back to my field completely revolutionized in my approach. Now I've learned how God operates."
- A girl came to see me because she was in conflict with her parents. She did not know how to handle it. We looked together at the Scriptures and it began to unfold for her. She went home and talked with her parents, and the next day she said, "Oh, things are so much better now because I could approach them this new way!"
- One morning, Brian had a Bible study with the wealthy businessman at whose home we were staying. It was a joy to hear him teach this man. Executive, prominent businessman that he was, he sat as a little child at Brian's feet and learned how to study the Bible. His whole life was enriched by that experience!
- A young pastor was facing dissension in his church. He wanted some counsel on how to handle it. God enabled the Scriptures to speak to that situation and give him wisdom and guidance for it.

All these good works had been prepared beforehand. All we did was step into them.

Do you have any idea how many good works God has prepared for you? They are waiting for you to enter into, as you walk in faith and trust and dependence upon Christ. They are entered by faith, by trust in the God who has raised us with Christ

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and made us to sit together with him. The situations are there, ready and waiting for you to step into. This is what God has called you to. As you do so, you become a vivid display of the greatness and the glory of God.

Let these thoughts rest in your heart and mind.

Give thanks to God for what he has done in Jesus Christ, and for the fact that this opens to us fantastic possibilities which stretch from this moment on beyond death into the coming ages, age following upon age, incredible numbers of possibilities for the manifestation of the greatness of our God.

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