

Man's Great Need

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It is of great value to consider our past. God says through Isaiah the prophet: “Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged” (Is.51:1). Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians that they were at one time “children of wrath even as others” (Eph.2:3). Reflection on our past should: (1) Encourage humility. We were in a hell-deserving mess, filthy and polluted. (2) Demonstrate that salvation is all of grace. It is the work of God. We could never save ourselves. (3) Stir us to praise God. Our salvation is from an awful pit and it is all God’s work. (4) Give us confidence and expectancy in evangelism. Since God saved us He can save anyone. Even the most sinful and hostile sinner can be born again. The behaviour, beliefs and educational attainments of the individual, essentially make no difference. It takes the same sovereign grace of God to convert every individual dead in sin. No matter how gifted we are in our evangelism, how persuasive in our arguments, how loving in our personality, we are totally ineffective without God, but even poor you or me if God chooses to use us discovers that with God’s help all things are possible.

The Fall

Adam was created knowing God, righteous and holy. He had a free will in the sense that he could choose to obey or disobey. He was not bent towards sin as we are. However, once he sinned, his will was in bondage to evil. Sin is easy and natural for fallen man. When God created Adam He entered into a covenant with him threatening him with death if he ate of the forbidden fruit and promising him life and blessing if he continued obedient. All of us were in Adam in this covenant of works. We all sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. In this way all men and women, being natural children of Adam (Jesus was protected by the virgin birth) are sinners even before they are born. The Bible explains the progression of sin from Adam to Cain, to Lamech, to the point just before the flood when God pronounced “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen.6:5).

Total Inability

By nature we are not just dull or asleep spiritually. The Bible says man is dead in sin. We have eyes yet we cannot see the God who is everywhere, or our own sinfulness and lostness, or Christ and the way of salvation, or heaven or hell. We have ears, yet we cannot hear the warnings in nature, in providence, in the conscience or in the Scriptures. We may sit in church and read the Bible yet fail to hear the gospel call. We have mouths but cannot pray for our needs or praise God as we ought. We have a heart, yet we cannot love the altogether lovely One. Our hearts are as hard as stone and as cold as ice. We have a duty to repent and believe the Gospel, but cannot because we are dead. Can the leopard change his spots or the Ethiopian the colour of his skin? (Jer.13:23). We are by nature in a state of total inability to start seeking or make one move to God without God's help. When in witnessing or preaching we plead with the sinner to flee to Christ it is like speaking to a corpse but God promises to accompany the Word by His Spirit and that is what makes all the difference.

Total Depravity

Our moral condition by nature is not just that we have a few sins and some guilty stains, but rather that we are dead in trespasses and sins.

“Trespasses” (Eph.2:1) refer especially to outward sin. Although we are dead to God yet we are alive in sin. In our unconverted state we break God's commandments and love to do so. We have a conscience but suppress it. We wish God was dead so that we would not have to give account to Him. We want to be free to wallow in sin.

“Dead in sins” (v1) refers to something more inward. It means missing the mark. The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer.17:9). We are “all under sin ... there is none righteous no not one” (Rom.3:9ff), and “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Is.64:6).

World – “according to the course of this world” (v2). This refers to the universal sinful path of mankind. All men since the fall are born in sin, walk along the broad road, following the fashions of the majority and subjected to peer pressure. Bunyan described this as Vanity Fair. Each one of us in the past was a “friend of the world” and an “enemy of God” (Jas.4:4). One sin breeds another.

Sin matured in Cain from self-righteousness, to jealousy to hatred to murder. In Judas Iscariot it developed from unbelief, to coveting, to stealing, and eventually to betraying Christ for thirty pieces of silver.

The devil is the “prince of the power of the air” (v2). He is the prince of this world who was banished from heaven for his sin. He is not omnipresent (everywhere) yet not having a body subject to the force of gravity he can move around quickly. He knows his days are short, he hates God and tries to do maximum damage to his kingdom, busily flying through the air tempting people. He has many devils obeying him. All the unconverted are his servants, his slaves.

Flesh – “lusts of our flesh” (v.3). These are the “desires of the flesh” which involve immorality, greed and drunkenness. And the desires “of the mind” which include idolatry, pride, covetousness, and deceit. “We all had” our lifestyle in these things in the past, Paul and the Ephesians, the Jews and the Romans, and Christians today also. We were “children of disobedience” like our father the devil. A lifestyle of constant sin.

Total depravity means that every part of man’s being is depraved. His understanding is darkened, his mind at enmity with God, his will is a slave to his darkened understanding and rebellious mind, his heart corrupt, his emotions perverted, his affections gravitate naturally to what is evil, his conscience is untrustworthy, his body is subject to mortality.

However, there is a difference between total depravity and absolute depravity. Man is not as bad as he can be. Those who will be in hell will be absolutely evil. In this world man is restrained by God, by fear of punishment, by governments and public opinion, by desire to please and be popular. The barbarians in Malta showed great kindness to shipwrecked Paul and companions (Acts 28). Some unconverted people do great acts of kindness and charity and shame Christians. Yet “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom.14:23). In the eyes of God they are constantly sinning.

Guilt

Sin is evil. It involves breaking the commandments which God

has given to mankind to be kept. God is love but God is also “a consuming fire” (Heb.12:29). He is holy and just, hates sin and must punish it. We were “by nature the children of wrath even as others”(v3). We were suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Rom.1:18), and resisting the Holy Ghost (Acts 7:51). “God is angry with the wicked every day” (Ps.7:11). But surely if I am in the elect, God loved me from all eternity? Yes in His plan he certainly has always loved us but we are still guilty before God. You are justified when, and only when, you believe (Rom.5:1). We are still under condemnation till we repent. The redemption which was purchased for us on Calvary has still to be applied to us.

Conclusion

We find these tremendous words in verse 4: “But God”. “But” is a small word with great significance. When our case was hopeless God intervened. God did it all. We were totally undeserving and unable. But sovereign grace changed us. The power which raised up Christ (Eph.1:19-20) raised us up from being dead in sins. Let us be humble considering what we once were, and realising that this salvation is all God’s work and not of man. Yes we must believe but even faith is the gift of God (v8). Glory be to God!

Look back and give thanks to the One who took you from that “horrible pit” and from that “miry clay”. Let us sing a new song to our God as we make new discoveries of what He saved us from. Even in heaven our song will be “Unto him that loved us and washed us from our sins” (Rev.1:5-6).

We need God’s help in evangelism. Jesus says to us to go and make disciples, to teach and baptise. This would be an impossible burden but for the fact that he also says: “all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth ... lo, I am with you always (Mt.28:18, 20). He builds His church. He saves the dead in sins. Success is guaranteed. Glory to God!