

Alive to Live

by Ray C. Stedman

In the second chapter of Ephesians, we are examining the great facts the Apostle Paul sets forth for us which explain who we are in Jesus Christ. Any psychologist will tell you that the basic solution to any mental problem is one of identity. The basic crisis of our day is an identity crisis. If we are going to solve the problems of our lives, we must know who we are. So the apostle is very careful to set forth exactly who we are in Christ. One of the worst struggles most of us have with our Christian faith is that we try to work out our problems without beginning at this foundation, without realizing who we are in Jesus Christ.

We have already seen, in previous studies, the depths of depravity and darkness from which the Lord Jesus lifts us – the human dilemma, the condition of fallen man, which would be utterly without any prospect of change for the better were it not for the grace of God operating in our lives. Then we saw, beginning in Verse 4, the fantastic change which was introduced by the words “But God...” And there is where we want to start again:

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, 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, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. {Eph 2:4-7 RSV}

You will notice that, when he is talking about who we are as Christians, the apostle makes it very clear that he is tracing through an exact parallel of the experience of the Lord himself. He identifies us

with what Jesus has gone through. We died with him, we learn in Romans 6. Now we are made alive together with him. We are “raised up with him, and made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” These are symbols that the apostle is employing. This beautiful hyperbole is designed to teach us something about ourselves and who we are as Christians. It is necessary, therefore, that we understand what these symbols actually mean in terms of our experience. Otherwise we will have no basis from which to handle the problems life can throw at us.

1. In our last study we tried to see what it meant to be alive in Christ, to be made alive together with him:

First of all, it means that we are no longer dead, that the condition into which we were born has been changed: We are no longer alienated and afraid of God. One of the very first marks of the change which occurs when a person comes to Jesus Christ is right at this point. He is no longer afraid of death. He is no longer afraid to confront God, to come before his presence. God is not seen any longer as his enemy, as a terrible judge, an avenger. Rather, he is seen as a friend, as a father, with a father’s love, a father’s arms, and a father’s heart.

Further, we saw that this means we are joined to Christ. Somehow we have been identified with him. His life has become our life, and our new identity is Christ. He is our life. “He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit,” {cf, 1 Cor 6:17}. So from then on we must never think of ourselves as what we once were in Adam. No longer are we that. We are in

Christ. We belong to him. He has welded himself to us so that an unbreakable union has been established, and we are his and he is ours. “You in me and I in you” {John 14:20b RSV} – these are his own words. Nothing can break this relationship.

This means, of course, that we are changed right to the very depths of our being. Something happened to us when we came to Jesus Christ which alters everything we are from that moment on. We are absolutely different. We are changed at the very root-level of our life. Fundamentally and foundationally, something has come in which has altered what we are, and it will begin to manifest itself from then on, and in many ways – a different outlook, different attitudes, a different approach to situations. It can create rather startling and dramatic changes right away.

Not long ago we received a package in the mail here at the church. We opened it, and to our amazement and bewilderment we found that it was a package of birth control pills. Who would send birth control pills to a church? We opened the card which came with the package and read:

Dear PBC:

The prescription for these pills dates to October. They are still good. Use them if you like. I no longer need them, as I am reformed, though not married. Praise the Lord! He is holding me up.

It was signed “The little toe of the Body.” We didn’t ask for that, didn’t know it was coming. But there is a sign of a basic change in a person because she was made alive in Jesus Christ.

Beginning at that point, we want to go on and see what happens as this new life begins to work itself out in terms of our experience. The apostle adds two other factors which are fundamental to this new relationship we have in Christ:

- We are raised up with him, and
- Made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

2. Again, this is following the parallel of what happened to Jesus. What happened to him is what happened to us. What happened to him? He died. And when they took his body down from the cross, it gave every evidence, it had all the marks, of death. Rigor mortis had set in. It was cold and stiff. A painting I once saw of the Descent from the Cross showed in stark and grisly detail the terrible fact of the death of Jesus. The mouth was open, the teeth were protruding, the eyes were glazed. It was obvious that this was a dead body. And that dead body was laid in the tomb. You remember how the utter, stark reality of that death cast a pall of gloom over the apostles. It dashed their hopes and was the end of all their dreams. The Lord was dead. But, on the third morning, God the Father infused into that dead body new life, and Jesus was made alive.

“And that,” says the Apostle Paul, “is an exact parallel to what happened to us when we were made alive in Christ. Into the death of our fallen humanity there came a new life, and new Spirit.” Of course, the body of Jesus was not left alive in the tomb. This is the next point the apostle makes. He didn’t remain there holding counseling sessions with people who came to visit him. No – he was raised up and put back into business. He was put back into life to operate once again, but on a different basis, with a different power. He was thrust back into the experiences of men, but with an entirely different basis upon which to reckon and to live. This is what the apostle says happened to us when we were made alive in Christ. So it is important for us to see this. We are called to go back into the same circumstances, into the same situation, but to reckon on a new power, to demonstrate a new power upon which to draw – resurrection life.

And this means that the Christian then is able to do what he never could do by himself. He is able to act in a way which is impossible to those who are without Jesus Christ. For example, he is able to love the unlovable, to endure the unendurable, to achieve the unachievable, and to forgive the unforgivable.

I don’t need to go outside the PBC congregation to illustrate this. There are those who have given every evidence, after they became

Christians, of being able to love those who were absolutely unlovable to them before.

Many a husband has told me that he had reached such a state of estrangement in his marriage that he literally hated his wife, couldn't stand the sight of her, couldn't abide her presence. But after he became a Christian a new relationship was born. He was able, despite struggles, to begin to look at his wife in a new way, and actually begin to love her. Many wives have said the same thing about their husbands.

Young people have told me how they hated their parents, had come to the place where they couldn't stand them a moment longer – everything their parents did turned them off. They regarded them as nothing but rivals and obstacles to everything they wanted to do. But after coming to Christ, they found it possible to come to a new sense of appreciation and understanding, and love for their parents began to bloom again. With pity and compassion they saw them as people like themselves, struggling with difficult problems they too were unable to handle. All this was possible because they were raised up and set back into life again, to handle the same problems, but with a different outlook.

Some here have learned to endure the unendurable. Not long ago I shared with you the experience of a woman in this congregation who has learned to struggle against unending pain, and yet to find in the midst of it a joy she cannot explain – joy in the midst of increasing pain. Another woman in this congregation has for thirteen years been unable to move about normally. She has gone through terrible struggles with depression, discouragement, and defeat. But the Lord has sustained her and kept her through this time. Gradually she has been able to come to a place of rest and contentment. And, although she has been close to it, she has never taken the way out which her mind suggested to her from time to time – a bottle of pills, or some other method of suicide. She has been able to endure because of the power released in her by a risen Lord.

There are some who have been able to achieve the unachievable. I rejoiced in talking to Paul Winslow not long ago about the Job Therapy program. He was reporting what had

been accomplished in California prisons by means of this. In certain prisons, when they first went in, the wardens were very suspicious and didn't feel it would ever accomplish anything. But as they explained that it was a means by which prisoners could be put in touch with Christian families who would visit them, make friends with them, and be available to meet whatever needs they might have when they got out, the wardens were willing to give it a chance. And Paul was telling me that recently some of these wardens have testified that the program has begun to change the atmosphere in their prisons. Perhaps you do not realize that many of the prisons in this country are in a condition almost as dire as that which produced the Attica revolt in New York state – seething with revolt and discontent, and ready to erupt in violence at any moment. But a new hope has begun to spread. "Salt" has been introduced. And change for the better is beginning. This is the power of a resurrected Lord. This is what "raised up with him" means – to come to life again with a new approach and a new power.

It means the ability to forgive the unforgivable. This weekend John Fischer is in Southern California visiting a Christian college. A few years ago he sang in the chapel of this college. With his guitar he sang some of the songs he has written which we know so well. Afterward, one of the professors of the school wrote a letter to the school paper attacking him very sarcastically, bitterly, and scurrilously – called it "musical garbage," said it was worthless. When John read the paper he was upset and angry. He was tempted to write this man off as obviously having no musical judgment whatsoever, and to feel resentful toward him for taking such a position. But then the Lord began to speak to him, said, "It isn't right for you to feel that way. This man shared how he felt in all honesty. You may not agree with him, but nevertheless you have no right to be resentful toward him." So John determined to take a Christian approach. The next time he was in the area he looked this man up and took him out to dinner. They sat down together in a rather strained atmosphere, at first, as you can imagine. The man didn't know what John wanted. But John asked him something about

his background, and it wasn't very long before they found a mutual interest and began to explore it. This led to other topics. The upshot was that after two hours they felt as close to one another as though they were brothers. They enjoyed a wonderful time together, and the subject of the letter never once came up. They simply appreciated each other. Later on this man heard that John was giving a concert some distance away. To John's surprise he showed up and listened to him play. He came to him afterward and told him how much his son appreciated John's music! The healing had started, you see.

That is the power of resurrection life. It is for situations like that. It is designed to confound the calculations of men, to transform the demoralized, and not to solve, but to dissolve the problems of life. Resurrection power works differently. It means that we come at life with a different attitude which often baffles and bewilders people. They can't figure it out, but recognize that it does wonderful things. That is what it is for. That is what it means to be raised up together with him.

3. The third factor involved in our basic relationship with Christ – part of our true identity – is not only that we have been made alive and raised up with him, but **we have been made to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus**. What does that mean? Well, several places in Scripture, Christ is said to have been raised up and made to sit at the right hand of God. In the first chapter of Hebrews, the writer says that no angel can ever compare with Christ because, as he puts it,

**But to what angel has he ever said,
“Sit at my right hand,
till I make thy enemies
a stool for thy feet?” {Heb 1:13 RSV}**

In the tenth chapter of the same book there is another reference:

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet. {Heb 10:12-13 RSV}

Why is Christ said to have “sat down” when he came to the right hand of the Father after his ascension? Well, it doesn't mean that he sits up there somewhere in a chair, waiting. It is obviously a picture, a symbol of something. Well, of what? What does sitting symbolize? It symbolizes cessation of effort, doesn't it? Sitting means the end of work and of strain. It is a beautiful picture of what the Scriptures call “rest.” We often sing:

Jesus, I am resting, resting
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.

It means dependence upon the work of another. If you were working away digging a hole – sweating and straining and tired and exhausted – and I came along and said, “Look, why don't you rest? I'll take over,” what would you expect me to do? Would you expect me to exhort you to try harder, get a sharper shovel, dig deeper? No. If I meant what I said, I would want you to get out of the hole and let me take the shovel while you sat down and relaxed. I would do the work. And this is the picture drawn for us of what a Christian is to do. He is to live as seated with Christ in the heavenlies. The heavenlies, of course, is not some far-distant spot in space where heaven is. It is the invisible realm of reality – the inner life, the place where we feel tension and pressure and anxiety and hostility. We are to rest there. Having done what Jesus asks us to do, we are to sit down and rest, relax, and let him bear the pressure and the problems.

It is amazing how difficult this is for Christians to grasp.

This past week I have been with a very successful businessman who is a Christian. But he has never been taught very much in this realm. He has naturally applied much of his business practice to his Christian life, and much of it can be applied. He has learned the necessity of planning goals and of moving toward them with smooth organization, thus bringing about the desired results. But he confessed himself to be utterly baffled by the way we operate around here. He said he was fascinated but mystified, because it looks as if we

are so loose, and yet it is amazing how everything works out. He said, "I have been counting the mistakes you made. And every one of those mistakes was the turning point to produce the good results which followed. I can't understand it!" He is learning the great fact that it isn't up to us to maneuver and manipulate to obtain the proper results. We are dealing with a God who has announced that he has ways of working which go beyond what we are able to do. He has told us that he is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think. So it is no good trying to sit down and reason out what he is going to do, because you can't ask or think what it is. He has announced through Isaiah:

**For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, ...
For as the heavens are higher than the
earth,
so are my ways higher than your
ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
{cf, Isa 55:8-9 RSV}**

We have to cry out with Paul,

**Oh, the depths of the riches both of
the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments,
and his ways past finding out! {cf, Rom
11:33}**

Do you see what this does to life? It turns it into an adventure, doesn't it? You never know what any situation is going to result in. A creative God, beginning to work in the most ordinary circumstances, can suddenly make them break wide open, and you have something on your hands which staggers you, which you never dreamed could happen, and which even alarms you, so vast are its possibilities. This is the kind of God we have, and this is what it means to sit – to expect him to do this, and to rest, and not be anxious and struggling and straining and striving and frantic.

There is one other factor involved in rest. Those verses in Hebrews tell us that, when he sat down at the right hand of the Father, our Lord was waiting for something. What? Well, "till his enemies were made his footstool" –

waiting until God the Father, working with the principles involved in the cross and the resurrection, shall produce harmony and peace once again in creation, and every force opposed to the authority of Jesus Christ shall be subdued, and every knee shall bow and confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. In other words, an absolutely certain result.

Now, it won't come quickly, and that is our problem. But what this figure of sitting involves is the expectation of a certain result, yet one we must wait for, with patience.

Here is where we struggle, isn't it? Perhaps the most difficult struggle in the Christian life is with the slowness of God. Have you found that out? How absolutely incredibly slow he is at times!

Do you get as impatient with him as I do? Why, there are times when I can see as clear as daylight how he ought to act! I can outline the steps for him – and I do! I tell him just what to do. And it would all work out if he would just take those steps. But he utterly ignores me and goes on doing nothing until I want to rise up and say, "Look, you've got to get off your throne and do something!" I struggle at this point. But God goes ahead, and, before I know it, what I had hoped – and more than I'd ever hoped – has happened. And I don't even know how it came about, at times. Some things I am still waiting for.

But this is the point. The Lord tells us that his work is like a farmer going out to sow his seed. The farmer scatters his seed, and then what? Jesus says he goes home and goes to bed – rests, just relaxes and lets the seed grow, because that is the nature of seed. The farmer knows that if he sows the seed and lets it rest – it must go through a certain process involving time; no seed merely drops into the ground and springs up suddenly; no, you must allow it to decay, to deteriorate, to fall apart, and then out of that comes a new life – it will grow slowly and steadily into the air until finally the whole plant is before you. God announces that this is his way of working. And he urges us to understand that the result is certain, and that we can rest patiently, knowing that he is working out his purposes. We are seated with him in the heavenly places.

I would like to make three concluding observations:

- First, this is true Christianity. Anything else is a fraud and a sham. Any effort to try to be “religious” or “Christian” which doesn’t stem from this threefold relationship of being made alive in Christ, raised with new power, and put back into life to rest in his activity and the certainty of his accomplishing his work, is a basic counterfeit of the Christian life. It is “godliness” without God, “Christianity” without Christ, “spirituality” without the Spirit. And it can never accomplish anything except to turn people away. What Paul has outlined for us here, and this alone, is true Christianity. Anything else is wrong.
- Second, these three great facts are already true of every regenerated Christian. They aren’t something you try to make true – they are already true. They are not something which is going to happen when you are further advanced and have another great experience with God, when you “speak with tongues” or something like that. They are already true. There is nothing more you can add. They are not something which needs to be augmented. They are the ultimate. There is no further you can go. And they have already happened. Now, they may not be your experience yet, because of two factors:
 - ◆ First, ignorance. You might not have begun to experience this because you were unaware of this relationship. Most of us don’t have much understanding of it. We don’t approach our problems this way. So we need to know more about it.
 - ◆ And, second, it may not be true in your experience because you love the pleasures the flesh can give you more than those of the Spirit. We all love the twisted, perverted pleasure of acting in the flesh, in the old way – the self-effort, the self-pleasing, self-indulgent life. We love that. So we choose it at times. But when we do, we ought to remember that we have not lost this threefold relationship. We can always return to it. It is not something tempo-

rary. It is a permanent fixture in our lives. And when we acknowledge the evil – the flesh to which we have submitted – we can return to this relationship.

- The third observation is: We discover that this relationship becomes observable and actual by faith, i.e., by actually living and acting on this basis, by trusting these facts as true and acting accordingly. That is faith. It means that we must employ them in the actual conditions of life. This is no mere armchair theology. There are no easy choices here. We are called on to obey these facts when the flesh within us is screaming for revenge, or when the heart faints with discouragement and despair and we are ready to give up, or when the temptation to be lustful or bitter or sarcastic sweeps over us in waves and we can only claim this relationship for moments at a time and must renew it again and again until at last we enter into some degree of calm and quiet.

It is a battle, but it is possible to win. Each time, we are to remind ourselves, “I am alive in Christ. I am not the same person. I am no longer what I once was. I may not be what I ought to be, but thank God I am not what I was! I am alive in Christ and I am raised with him. I have a new power at my disposal – the power of his life in me. Therefore I can rest. I can step out and say and do the right thing, and expect him to accomplish the results. I can relax. I don’t have to strain. I can leave the problem of solving the difficult situations in his hands, and I will wait for the ultimate and certain result.”

When I do this, I have learned to let God be God in me. This is the way God works. This is the way the life of God is released in the human situation. What a tremendous basis for living! This is our identity from now on. It is who you are. Start every day on this basis, and meet every situation on this basis.

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. {cf, Gal 2:20 KJV}

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this marvelous picture which is true of us; just as certainly as you see life as it really

is, so this is true of us. We pray that you will enable us to grasp it, to understand it, and to begin to handle the problems now before us in the light of this basis of living. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.