

# SPIRITUAL RESURRECTION

## Ephesians 2:4-5

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But God, being rich in mercy, because 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 (Eph. 2:4-5).

If I were asked to summarize the apostle Paul's message in the Book of Ephesians, I would not hesitate to say that there is one major emphasis that comes through everything he is saying in this letter. Paul wants us to know that to become a Christian is to be fundamentally changed as a person. A Christian is fundamentally different from non-Christians and different from the person he or she was before coming to Christ in faith. The changes effected by Christ are not on the periphery of a person but at the very center, changing his basic identity, his nature, and what he is in his essence.

I think the verse that best sums up Paul's message in Ephesians is found in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." That is what Ephesians is all about.

Becoming a Christian is not like joining a country club or taking up a hobby or even undertaking a career change. All these things affect one area of your life but not the others. They are add-ons which do not define who you really are. They are activities to which you devote a certain amount of your life, whereas Christ is your life if you are in him. "For me, to live is Christ," Paul insists (Phil. 1:21).

Of course, all of us are imperfectly committed to the Lord. But according to Paul's teaching, anyone who treats Christianity as just

one compartment of his life, or whose essential person is unchanged by his faith, simply is not a Christian and is not saved. Furthermore, this is true not merely of some Christians – those who are especially devout or committed – but for all Christians. You are not a Christian at all unless an essential change has happened in the core of your person. Martyn Lloyd Jones writes:

If [Christianity] is not controlling the whole of your life, then you are just not a Christian. Christians are not people of whom it can be said that their lives are identical with everybody else', but they have an extra something in addition... No, to be a Christian, says Paul, means that at the very centre, at the very core of your being and existence, this new something has come in and controls everything.<sup>1</sup>

## LIFE FROM THE DEAD

**I**n Ephesians 2:5, Paul defines what has happened to a Christian in the most radical terms possible? “When we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ.” Paul says the change that happens to a Christian is as radical as life from the dead. It is impossible to imagine a more fundamental or comprehensive change than that.

According to Paul, and the Bible as a whole, conversion to Christ involves a spiritual resurrection. You were dead – dead in sins, dead to God, dead in condemnation – but God has given you life. What has happened to us spiritually is what happened when Jesus stood before the tomb and cried, “Lazarus, come out” (Jn. 11:43). Lazarus rose from the grave, and Jesus commanded that his grave clothes be removed. That is what has happened spiritually to all whom Jesus calls to his salvation.

Our spiritual rebirth is analogous to what happened in the creation of the world. It is a re-creation and follows the pattern of the first creation. Genesis 1 tells us that God created all things by his Word, and likewise Peter says to believers, “You have been born again... through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). Furthermore, we are told that in the first creation “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). In the same

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<sup>1</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Life of Peace: An Exposition of Philippians 3 & 4* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 49-50.

manner, it is God's Spirit who applies God's Word to our hearts and animates our spirits with a new principle of life.

The result of this regeneration is that we are made anew; we pass from death to life. We should think of this in two simultaneous ways, both judicially and spiritually. Judicially, that is, legally as we stand before God's throne of judgment, believers pass from death to life. Jesus said in John 5:25, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Paul says in verse 4 that we were "dead in our trespasses", and in verse 3, "child-rem of wrath." Though we have merited death through our sins, Christ has cleansed us by his death and we are justified through faith in him. We deserved death, but Christ nailed our sins to his cross and granted us life through the gift of his perfect righteousness imputed to us through faith alone.

But Christianity involves more than a legal change of status; to be saved means far more than to be forgiven. We were legally under the curse of death, but our very natures were also spiritual dead, unresponsive to God. Now we have been made spiritually alive to God in Christ. Lloyd-Jones, again, explains it well:

Regeneration is an act of God by which a principle of new life is implanted in man, and the governing disposition of the soul is made holy... God by His mighty action puts a new disposition into my soul."<sup>2</sup>

The rebirth does not give us new faculties. We had a brain before; we have a brain now. We had souls, we had a will, we had a body, and all that remains true. We also had certain talents, abilities and experiences, and we retain them as Christians. But there is a new governing principle that is made alive at the very center of our being. Our spirits, which were dead to God, are regenerated and made alive to him. The old faculties and abilities are governed in a new way so that, while we remain ourselves, everything has changed. James Boice shows how this changes every aspect of our lives:

When God breathes new spiritual life into us in the work known as regeneration, we become something we were not before. We have a new

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<sup>2</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 79.

life. That life is responsive to the one who gave it. Before this, the Bible meant nothing to us when we read it or it was read in our hearing. Now the Bible is intensely alive and interesting. We hear the voice of God in it. Before this, we had no interest in God's people... Now they are our very best friends and co-workers. We love their company and cannot seem to get enough of it. Before this, coming to church was boring. Now we are alive to God's presence in the service. Our worship times are the very best times of the week. Before this, service to others and witnessing to the lost seemed strange and senseless, even repulsive. Now they are our chief delight. What has made the difference? The difference is ourselves. God has changed us. We have become alive to him. We are new creatures.<sup>3</sup>

This is not something optional for the front-line Christians. These are not things that are true merely for those who will rise to leadership positions in the church. Ultimately, there is no two-tier Christianity. This enlivening is something all Christians have experienced, and know they have experienced. Our Lord Jesus said to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). Nicodemus was puzzled at the idea of entering his mother’s womb a second time, but Jesus assured him that it was a spiritual rebirth. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,” Jesus replied. “You must be born again” (Jn. 3:6-7).

The new birth is necessary to salvation; you cannot be forgiven, you cannot be changed, and you cannot enter into heaven unless, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:5, you who were dead in trespasses are made alive together with Christ.

So how do you know you are born again, that you have passed from death to life? The most essential answer is that it is by the new birth that sinners repent and believe on Jesus Christ. It is by the Word and God’s Spirit that anyone truly believes, so that those who trust in Christ are born again and enter a new life in which all the other blessings of salvation are certain to follow.

## DEAD TO SIN, ALIVE TO GOD

**W**hen the New Testament speaks about our spiritual resurrection it always speaks in two ways. The first is that those who are

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<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 2:678.

born again are *dead to sin*. That is, a new life has begun and the end has come to our former life that was dead in sin.

Perhaps Paul's clearest teaching on this is found in Romans 6. There, he challenges the idea that God's grace could lead to a life that continues in sin: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" Just as Jesus died on the cross for our sins, by union with him in faith we too have died to sin, "in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:1-4).

The implication of the new birth is that *we must no longer live as we did before*. We are no longer what we were; our old life has ended, and therefore we must no longer try to live in the old manner. We can never go back to the old life – and let me say that if we try to live in the old way we only make a mockery of ourselves. God's Spirit lives in us now, so we cannot prosper in the ways of sin. An adult cannot become a child again, but he can disgrace himself with childish behavior. Likewise, as Christians, the only thing for us to do is renounce the old life of sin, the end of which was death, and embrace the reality that we are no longer to live as we formerly did. John Stott puts it this way:

Our biography is written in two volumes. Volume one is the story of the old man, the old self, of me before my conversion. Volume two is the story of the new man, the new self, of me after I was made a new creation in Christ. Volume one of my biography ended with the judicial death of the old self. I was a sinner. I deserved to die. I did die. I received my deserts in my Substitute with whom I have become one. Volume two of my biography opened with my resurrection. My old life having finished, a new life to God has begun.<sup>4</sup>

This takes us directly to the second reality involved in our having been brought from death to life by God. Christians are dead to sin and also *alive to God*. The rebirth is the beginning of the spiritual life of walking with God in righteousness and truth and love. Paul puts this together in Romans 5:11: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." We need to know this lest we should be tempted to return to the former ways of sin and death.

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<sup>4</sup> John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 6-8* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 48, 49.

God has done for us what Hernando Cortez did for the Spanish explorers who landed in Mexico. As soon as they arrived in the New World, Cortez burned the ships that might take them back to their former life. With the ships burned, his army had nowhere to go but forward into victory and into the riches of their new life.

That is exactly what God has done for us in Christ. We cannot pretend not to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us and convicting us of sin. We cannot deny or reject the authority of the God we have come to know. We cannot keep God's Word from stirring up our hearts and enlightening our minds. The life of spiritual death is behind us – and praise the Lord for that. We are alive to God and we are now to live for him. Paul therefore commands us: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:12-14).

This means we are to offer our eyes to God, no longer sinning in lust or envy or otherwise watching sinful things, but using them to bring godly things into our minds. We are to offer our lips to God, making our speech a source of blessing and salvation, instead of, as James 3:8 puts it, the "restless evil, filled with poison," that used to characterize our speech. We are to offer our feet to God, so that they take us into places of worship and ministry rather than of sin and folly. We are to offer our hands to God, helping those in need and lifting up those who are fallen. This is the new life to which we have been saved; it could not be more practical.

Because of the new birth, Christians are dead to the old life of sin and must no longer live as we did before. But this is combined with the wonderful news that Christians are now alive to God. This means that we not only *must* not live as we did before but that we *may* not live as we did before. Combined with a new obligation is a new ability. We are able in Christ to do what we never could before. Why? Because the power of God is now working in our lives. This is the point of Paul's analogy between our rebirth and the resurrection of Jesus. Our

new life is energized by the same power that raised Jesus from the grave. Therefore things that are naturally beyond our power are now possible to us in the power of God. “My grace is sufficient for you,” God says, “for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Therefore, Paul boasted, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

Do you realize, if you have come to faith in Christ, that God’s own power is available for your growth in grace and godliness? When you pray asking for strength to turn from sin or to grow in godly character, God’s power flows to you through the channel of your faith and by the work of his Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:20, “The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.” The availability of Christ’s resurrection power is the cause of our boldness in the Christian life; this is why we can aspire to holiness and purity and godly love. For as Paul wrote to young Timothy, “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7).

## JESUS & NICODEMUS

I mentioned Jesus’ teaching to Nicodemus in John 3, one of the most important passages on the spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus came to Jesus at the beginning of our Lord’s ministry, after Jesus had taught and performed miracles in Jerusalem. Nicodemus represented everything the world admires, everything in which a man might place his confidence for salvation. John 3:1 introduces him as “a man of the Pharisees... a ruler of the Jews.” The Pharisees were those most admired by the people for their religious piety. No one performed more and better religious works than people like Nicodemus. Furthermore, he was “a ruler of the Jews” (Jn. 3:1). He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling body among the Jews in that day. Moreover, we can be sure that Nicodemus was also a scholar. All Pharisees were devoted students of Scripture. Given his Greek name, Nicodemus must also have come from a family that studied the philosophers. What more could a man be than this? It is hard to pick a similar figure from our own time who combines all this: religious devotion, political power, ethical excellence and erudite scholarship.

This is the man who came to Jesus. John tells us he came by night, no doubt to avoid being seen consulting a mere carpenter turned rabbi like Jesus of Nazareth. But Nicodemus saw something he admired in Jesus; he said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him” (Jn. 3:2). It seems that Nicodemus was offering his considerable help to Jesus’ ministry. If Jesus were just a human rabbi, I am sure he would have accepted; the partnership of such a man could mean access, recognition, political pull and financial support.

But Jesus was not just another human teacher, and he was not impressed by either Nicodemus or his assistance. Jesus replied, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:3). This was Jesus’ message to a man like Nicodemus, just as it is his message to everyone who thinks to be saved by his pedigree or power, by popularity or good works or petty morality.

What are you bringing to Jesus for your salvation? Do you, like so many people, expect God to accept you as “a basically good person.” If so, Jesus will convict you of the reality of your sin and demand that you confess your need of his grace. Do you offer the clean hands of supposedly good works? Then Jesus will point to the spots your eyes do not see. He will tell you to clean out the inside of your heart, where filthy things live and flourish. Whatever works or human merit you bring to God expecting to be commended and accepted in the holy courts of heaven, Jesus says to you as to Nicodemus, “You must be born again,” even to see the kingdom of heaven.

This is something Paul had to learn. He once boasted in similar sources of self-righteousness, things he considered spiritual assets – his bloodline, his upbringing, his circumcision, his religious works and morality, his hatred of God’s enemies. But when God opened his eyes, he realized, “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count... them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:7-10). Just as Paul realized, and just as Jesus demanded of Nicodemus,



whoever you are you must repent of your former life, of your claims to merit before God, laying hold instead to God's grace in Jesus Christ, by which you a sinner may be born again.

## SAVED BY GRACE

That is the statement Paul makes in completing verse 5: "By grace you have been saved." We hear a lot about grace, but here we find what it really means to be saved by grace alone.

To be saved by grace means that *you do not deserve what God has granted to you*. It is not something that happens because of what you are or what you have done – but in spite of what you are and what you have done. Grace is often defined as God's unmerited favor. That is true, but it does not go far enough. Grace is God's favor to those who have merited his wrath. Paul says, "We were dead in our trespasses"; we were at war with God and under God's just condemnation. But by his sheer grace alone – not because of something in you but because of something in him, because, as verse 4 says, "God is rich in mercy... because of the great love with which he loved us" – God saved you when you deserved to be condemned, when you were unable even to lift a finger to believe and come to God. As Paul wrote in Titus 3:5-6, "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior."

Grace also means that *you did not achieve salvation by any power within yourself* but by the resurrection power of God working in your life. "God made us alive" when we were dead – this, too, is what it means to be saved by grace.

Having been saved by grace, we continue to live by grace. Christians do not grow through their own effort or their own inner strength, but through the grace of God that works mightily in our lives through God's Word and prayer. Therefore the Christian who wants to grow in his or her faith, to bear the spiritual fruit that is of God, will devote himself to the Bible and will regularly draw near to God in prayer.

Third, this passage tells us that *to be saved by grace is to be joined to the Lord Jesus Christ through faith*. It was "together with Christ" that

God made us alive. It is because Christ died for us and rose again for us that we die to our old lives and live anew to God, as Christ's redemptive power works through every area of our lives.

## THE TWO "MUSTS"

I think back to Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus that "You must be born again." But he made a second statement in John chapter 3 that also centers on the word *must*. When Nicodemus asked how this could be, Jesus replied, "The Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15). When Jesus told Nicodemus of his need to be born again, he knew that for that to happen it was also necessary for him to die on the cross for our sins.

Nicodemus didn't understand this at first and he departed from our Lord. But he shows up again in John's Gospel. In John 7 we are told that he spoke up for Jesus before the Sanhedrin and was criticized for sympathizing with Jesus. He still stood apart from Christ, trusting his political and religious credentials, though God was calling in his heart and Nicodemus was starting to listen. As often happens, the new birth did not take place without God working for some time in his life.

The day came, however, when what Jesus had spoken of actually happened: the Son of Man was lifted up on the cross. Nicodemus was there, and as he stood by and watched, he surely remembered Jesus' words: "You must be born again... the Son of Man must be lifted up". Finally, then, the scholar and politician and religious leader saw the kingdom of God. He saw Jesus upon the cross as the Savior of his own soul; he saw his own redemption by the shedding of Christ's precious blood; and by God's grace, through faith, he was born again.

John 19:38-39 tells us what happened. After Jesus' death, "Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus... asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission...

Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes." Finally Nicodemus came out into the light with his commitment to Jesus. He cast aside his reputation among the religious and scholarly and political elite. He turned his back on fame and wealth and the lifestyle they might offer him and turned in faith to the crucified Jesus Christ, willing to be his

disciple, come what may. “So it is,” Jesus had said to him on that fateful first night’s meeting, “with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:8).

The Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross, because you must be born again. And it is by believing that Jesus died for your sins, and that he rose again to grant you eternal life, that you, like Nicodemus, “even when you were dead in trespasses, are made alive together with Christ.”