

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

From Death to Life

Colossians 2:13-15

Mark Vroegop

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Col 2:13-15

There are times when, in the study of the Bible, you come to certain key ideas that are so basic, so foundational, and so critical that if you were to miss the idea nothing else would make sense. Such is the case with the idea captured in Colossians 2:13-15. I don't care who you are, how long you've been coming to church, how old you are, or if you are still trying to figure spiritual things out. You have to understand this!

Here is the idea that you must understand: **Jesus moves people from death to life.** Now this is more than a statement about what happens to you when you die. That is not what I mean, nor is that what this text is talking about. There is a real spiritual reality in this auditorium today that you cannot see, but just because you can't see it easily doesn't mean it isn't real. And the reality of this room is that there are dead people in here and there are alive people here. You may not be able to see it, but it is no less real.

How many of you are right handed? Left-handed? This room is filled with people living in two different realities – a right-handed world and a left-handed world. And just because you can't see it doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Well, that is the same thing from a spiritual standpoint, but it is far more important here. Can I be very blunt? People do not go to hell because they are left-handed (despite what arrogant right-handers might think). But people go to hell because they never deal with the reality of the fact that they are spiritual dead.

Therefore, everyone in this room has to know two things:

1. Am I spiritually dead or alive?
2. What does that mean?

Remember that this section of Colossians 2:8-3:4 is about Jesus-centered thinking, a section of the Bible that helps us to see ourselves clearly. Central to seeing ourselves clearly is realizing that the Christian life is lived vicariously – through Jesus. And a foundational truth, undergirding the entire Bible, is the idea that Jesus moves people from spiritual death to spiritual life.

So let's turn the spotlight of our attention to this subject, and see if we can once again learn how to live practically in light of our spiritual position. We will see this by looking at how the Bible describes the spiritual deadness of every person without Jesus, and then examining what it means for a person to be spiritually alive through Christ.

Spiritually Dead

Last week we learned about two other spiritual positions: circumcised in Him and raised with him. Paul wanted these believers to live in light of their position, and in verses 13-15 he is going to talk about the power of their spiritual life. But in order to make the power of their spiritual life in Christ clear, he contrasts it with the dark picture of where they were before life came. He reminds them of their spiritual deadness.

Verse 13 highlights three things about spiritual deadness: 1) it is a real position, 2) it is linked to transgressions (sin), and 3) it is characterized by spiritual alienation from God.

A real position

It is important to identify from the beginning that Paul makes an assumption here. Verse 13 indicates that these people were formerly dead. Now he is not referring to their physical status; rather, he is talking about a spiritual condition. They were spiritually dead. What does this mean? In short it means that all sinners, apart from Christ, have no spiritual life within them. We start from a position of spiritual helplessness. From a spiritual standpoint, we are the living dead and God's grace is the only thing that can overcome their hopeless position.

This real spiritual position is something that is natural to every human being -- "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins...carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind" (Eph 2:1-3). This spiritual position is the simple reality of being a human being. We are born alive physically and dead spiritually.

Linked to transgressions

Now this position is linked to our innate sinfulness or our transgressions. Notice that the passage says that you were dead "in your trespasses." The word transgression means

particular and deliberate acts of disobedience.¹ Now you might think that the transgressions created your deadness, but that is not what is meant here.

Adam's sin caused every person to be born spiritually dead ("...sin came into the world through one man {Adam} and death through sin, so death spread to all men because all sinned" Rom 5:12). These transgressions are the expressions of one's spiritual deadness. In other words, the text could read "You were spiritually dead, being characterized by (or in) your trespasses."

Further, transgressions are the continual expressions of our rebellion against God. Our depraved and spiritually dead position causes an innate hostility toward God – "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God..." (Rom 8:7).

Spiritual alienation

Finally, we see that spiritual deadness is characterized by spiritual alienation or separation from God. This is what the phrase "the uncircumcision of your flesh" means. It is using symbol of circumcision to say something more. Spiritual dead people are alienated from God in the same way that an uncircumcised person was alienated from the people of Israel.

Spiritual deadness expresses itself in a darkened mind and a hard heart. "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of their heart" (Eph 4:18). And Satan loves to have it this way, and he works to keep as many people in this position as he can. "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ..." (2 Cor 4:4).

Darkened, blinded, hard hearted, filled with transgressions, hostile to God, natural born sinners, spiritual alienation, separation, and damned – these are the words that describe every single human being's spiritual starting point. You don't start neutral. You are dead, lifeless, with no power and no hope in you.

We are the walking dead. We are like Lazarus; Jesus must call us forth from the tomb. Our only hope is for God through Jesus to give us life. We have to be born again (John 3:1-15), and God is the only one who has the power to do that. Dead people cannot produce life -- "...who we born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

Spiritual deadness means that our only hope is Jesus. And there are some here today who God is graciously opening your spiritual eyes to see that the real problem is your spiritually darkened

¹ See Job 36:9; Ezek 14:11, 13; Rom 5:15-18, 2 Cor 5:19, Eph 1:7.

heart. Don't resist the gracious call of God! Believe in Jesus. Receive him as your Savior, and allow God to do what you cannot – to raise you from your position of spiritual death.

From Death to Life!

Let's get back to the main thought: Jesus moves people from death to life. Paul wanted the Colossian believers to live in light of their position – to live vicariously. He wants believers in Jesus to connect their position in Jesus to where we live.

Notice that verse 13 tells us two things regarding how spiritual life happens: 1) by the resurrection of Jesus, and 2) by the forgiveness of sin. I want to deal with them in reverse order.

Forgiveness

It is important for you to see that the sacrifice for sins had to come before the resurrection because the cause for spiritual death (sin) had to be dealt with. So there cannot be a resurrection without atonement. Sin had to be paid in order for victory to be declared. The cross allows God to be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26).

So what does God do through the cross? He graciously cancels our sin debt. We see this idea expressed in four unique ways:

- The word for forgive here is *charizomai*. It is a form of the word for grace (*charis*). There are other words that also translated as forgive, but this one has a particular bent: to treat graciously. So the idea is that God chooses to show mercy and grace. He treats us in a way that we don't deserve.
- The record of debt was canceled.² Verse 14 tells us that there was a record of indebtedness tied to legal demands. This refers to the divine record of every person's disobedience to God's law. You could think of this as moral demerits, a record of violations, or like points on a license.³ And the beauty of the sacrifice of Christ is that God took the list of all your violations of His law, and he cancels your indebtedness. He takes away a record that would have been used to condemn you ("that stood against us").
- The cancelation came by the force of the cross. ESV says, "he set aside." The word can mean something even stronger though. It can refer to the removal by force, even by deadly force. Jesus attacked the record of moral indebtedness, Satan's basis of accusation, by his death. That is why the next phrase says, "...nailing it to the cross."

² Jesus used *charizomai* in Luke 7:42 in the same way, and Paul uses it in Ephesians 4:32.

³ See also Revelation 20:12

There are two possible and powerful metaphorical meanings of this phrase. First, it could refer to Jesus' body being nailed to the cross, indicating that he set the debt aside by becoming the legal demand himself. Second, it could mean that the accusation nailed to the cross was the accusation our spiritual indebtedness. Regardless, I think you can see the forceful, powerful, and stunning statement. Whether Jesus is the embodiment of our debt or if our debt hangs over him, the reality is the same: Jesus canceled my debt by the force of his own death.

- The result is spiritual victory. Verse 15 indicates that Jesus' sacrifice was a triumph over the cosmic forces of evil. The spiritual rulers and authorities did not surrender; Jesus conquered them, and put them to open shame. The cross of Christ canceled the basis of Satan's accusations, exposed Satan for what he really is, and declared people no longer held in his grip. The result was that Satan was disarmed.

Imagine a conversation between God and Satan where the Enemy perpetually hounds the Creator God because the pinnacle of creation – men and women – have rebelled against Him. Image a scenario where Satan makes it personal: "Mark doesn't love you; he hates you, just like I do. Look at his life – every day he violates your law in some way...for 37 years he has massed up a thick file with thousands of violations. I have the evidence right here!" Imagine that God takes the file, opens it, and says, "Satan, there are no charges here. The indictments are all blank!"

Imagine how you would feel knowing that your accuser was exposed as a liar! And imagine the love that you would feel for Jesus who is the only one who made your file clean!

The gracious canceling of the damning indictment in the person of Jesus and through his death is the basis for all forgiveness. Jesus graciously canceled our debt by the force of the cross, exposing the lies of the enemy, and releasing us from his accusatory grip. Jesus set us free!

Newness of Life

All of this is expressed in the short but powerful phrase in verse 13 – "And you who were dead...God made alive together with him." You have been brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. You were translated from the realm of Satanic accusations about your sins to a position of complete forgiveness. You were loosed from the power of sin's guilt to the liberating truth that in Christ you are a new creation...the old has passed away, behold the new has come (2 Cor 5:19).

The pass from spiritual death to spiritual life means that God, through Jesus Christ, made you alive. He took your darkened heart, your alienated status, your hostile will, your dead soul, and he breathed new life into it. He made you born again!

He made you a different person – as different as living people are from dead people. Sure you may look the same; you have the same body. But the spiritual reality of your life couldn't be any more different. The contrast is infinitely more amazing than what you can even get your mind around.

Jesus called you forth from the tomb of your own heart. He called you from death to life.

Live Vicariously!

Last week I wanted to create a new category in your mind – a call to live through Jesus. So how does this text relate to that idea?

1. **There no spiritual life in any other.** I want you to realize this morning that there no other person in the universe who can birth you from death to life. You cannot do this on your own. Paul even said, “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ but by the Spirit” (2 Cor 12:3). God may be drawing you today! This day is no accident. I want to call you to run to Jesus and put your faith in him.
2. **Celebrating your position is the basis for obedience.** If you know Christ, your heart leaps when we talk about how he has brought us from death to life. It fills your heart with great love for Jesus; it ignites a passion in you to follow Jesus. Obedience is just that – a deep love, an overwhelming understanding of God's grace that leads you to follow Him. Obedience does not come from hearts who desire to impress God or earn his approval – that is bondage. True obedience comes from the overwhelming understanding of God's grace to us in the person of Jesus.
3. **Live like who you are!** Since we have such a victory in Jesus and since we have so great a salvation we must live like the free people that we really are. If we are raised with Christ, then we ought to seek things that are above (Col 3:1). If we are new men and women, then we ought to live like it (Col 3:12ff). You've been set free. Your file is completely clean. You are alive! So live like it!

We sing this truth this way:

In Christ alone! – who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,

Scorned by the ones He came to save:
'Til on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied –
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay,
Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine –
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
'Til He returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand!

We've been brought from death to life!

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