

The Perfect Gift - Christmas Day 2010 - Shofar East London

If someone were to ask you what Christmas day is about, what would your answer be? Some answers might be: gifts, overeating, family time, singing carols, or shops competing for your hard-earned bonus or holiday pay (if you are in the privileged position of having received such payment☺). Another answer might be that it commemorates the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Or three wise men following a star to Bethlehem, or a group of shepherds being visited by an angel... Some will tell you that from a Christian perspective, Christmas Day is not on the anniversary of the day that Jesus was born and that the origins of the Christmas day celebration are pagan. But today we are going to set all of that aside and allow ourselves the joy of being reminded of the miracle of the birth of Jesus Christ as a human being on the earth, and what that can mean to all of us.

I hope to show you today that the most perfect gift that you or I will ever receive is that of understanding who Jesus Christ is and making the significance and power of what He has done for you and me our own.

I think that one of the most thought-provoking statements that I've heard goes something like this: "If I believe something and I'm staking my life on it, I had better make sure that it is true." As there is not enough time this morning to study the manifold proofs of the truth of Scripture, I would ask you to, for the duration of this session, accept that Scripture is true. Should you have a problem with that, please suspend your disbelief for now, and speak to one of us afterwards about it.

Let me read a passage from the Scriptures to you - it was written by the Apostle Paul, (who was appointed, or sent, by the Lord to serve the gentile [non-Jewish] Church) to the Ephesians who were mostly gentile believers. So these readers were people who had already committed their lives to the Lord, in other words, had become Christian believers. It is important to note that virtually all of the epistles (letters to the churches) contain very similar passages or explanations - I chose this one because it is inclusive, yet concise.

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NLT)

¹Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. ²You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. ³All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

⁴But God is so rich in mercy, and He loved us so much, ⁵that even though we were dead because of our sins, He gave us life when He raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) ⁶For He raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. ⁷So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of His grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all He has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

⁸God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago.

Now what I want to do is to take this portion of Scripture and use it to explain the gospel, or "good news of Jesus Christ".

Ephesians 2:1 (NLT)

¹Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.

What does Paul mean that we were dead, and who did we disobey, and what is sin? Well, the sense of the word "dead" here is that of being separated from the Lord. This death is as a result of not living by His standard, disobeying the Lord. See how this sense is conveyed in the NCV translation:

Ephesians 2:1 (NCV) reads:

¹In the past you were spiritually dead because of your sins and the things you did against God.

This verse also gives us the answer to the question of who we disobey - "the things you did against God". Sin may be defined as "missing the mark" in the context of archery or any other form of target shooting. So sin may be described as missing the standard set by the Lord - another definition might be "to love less" in other words, to love the Lord and His desire and plan for us less than our own desires or pleasure.

So Paul is saying to the Ephesian believers that they, in common with absolutely everyone else throughout history (except for Jesus Christ), had been spiritually dead, or separated from God, by disobeying Him and loving Him less than their own will and pleasure.

We have all, in common with everyone else throughout history (except for the Lord Jesus Christ) fallen short of the standard set by the Lord (sinned).

Ephesians 2:2 (NLT)

²You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God.

At the outset I think that it is very important to establish that God is good, He absolutely adores you and me - He calls us the pinnacle of His creation. We also need to understand very clearly that the devil is bad. He is every person's enemy. He is by nature a liar and nothing pleases him more than deceiving people.

We live our lives in submission and obedience to the Lord - or to the devil.

1 Peter 5:8-11 (NLT) reads:

⁸Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

Many people lay an accusation at the feet of the Lord when "bad things" happen, such as "how could a good God allow such-and-such to happen?". Every genuinely bad thing that happens is as a result of the enemy taking advantage of the sin of mankind. We need to realize that this is the truth. The tragedy is that often the sinful act of one person can lead to "bad things" happening to an "innocent bystander". And the devil loves this.

In Ephesians 2:2 we discover that our lives are clearly defined as being either for the Lord, or against Him - there is no middle ground - let no-one deceive you into thinking that this is the case, it's not.

God is good. The devil is bad and is every person's enemy.

Ephesians 2:3 (NLT)

³All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else.

All of our natures were sinful, we have been brought up in, and trained by, the world and its standards. We have inherited and imitated a sinful nature from our ancestors and our peers. But why does sin earn the Lord's anger? It is because sin is disobedience to the Lord - He is Supreme, knows everything (including the end!) and has a great plan for each one of us, if we'll only listen to Him! So when we disobey Him, He needs to get our attention somehow. And this is why He will show His anger when we sin - it does not mean that He loves any less! Does a father hate his child when he disciplines him or her - of course not! It is because of his love that he disciplines.

Sin earns the Lord's anger.

Ephesians 2:4a (NLT)

⁴But God is so rich in mercy

Rich in mercy? So what is mercy?

Mercy is where punishment that is deserved is withheld.

Ephesians 2:4-5 (NLT)

⁴But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, ⁵that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!)

Life here has the sense of eternal, intimate life into eternity with the Lord. When Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, a victory that stands for eternity was established. It is as valid now as it was when it happened about 20 centuries ago, and will be valid forever. We'll discuss God's grace a little later on.

God in His grace offers us eternal life in His company through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:6 (NLT)

⁶For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus.

We are united with Christ Jesus - remember that Paul is speaking to believers here - so how does this happen? How can we be united with Christ in eternal life so that we can be freed from death?

Romans 10:9-13 (NLT)

⁹If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. ¹¹As the Scriptures tell us, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced." ¹²Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. ¹³For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Verse 11 is a direct quotation from the old testament book of Isaiah (28:16), and verse 13 from Joel (2:32). We know that the old testament was translated into Greek from Hebrew around 400 years before Jesus Christ was born into the world. That shows a remarkable consistency in the way that the Lord works, would you not agree? It means that not less than 2400 years ago the path of salvation, or access to life with the Lord, was exactly the same as it is today!

We are united with Christ by believing in our hearts that we are made right with God, and it is by confessing with our mouths that we are saved from a life that leads to eternal separation from Him.

Ephesians 2:7 (NLT)

⁷So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of His grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all He has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

This is quite clearly true of many people through the history of the Church, and when we look at the lives of genuine Christians we can clearly see the hand of the Lord in their lives - the evidence of the Lord's abundant grace and kindness towards them - and it should show us that there is simply no better way.

We can see the truth of this in the lives of genuine Christians.

Ephesians 2:8 (NLT)

⁸God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God.

Any gift is only of use to the intended recipient if he or she actually receives it and puts it to use. Imagine that someone presents you with an envelope addressed to you. When you open it you find a letter that gives you details of a banking account in your name that contains R100 000 000.00. Had you not opened the letter, you would not have known about the account. But now that you have the knowledge, you need to access and manage the funds. It is exactly the same with the perfect gift of salvation that is freely available to us in Jesus Christ.

Grace is the unearned and undeserved favour of the Lord towards us as a result of His love for us, so we do not earn our salvation, we receive it as an unearned and undeserved "perfect gift"!

Ephesians 2:9 (NLT)

⁹Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

This verse reminds me of something that is so very important to know - none of us is capable of "cleaning up our act" without the help of the Lord. So if you are sitting here and thinking that you are not good enough to be saved by the Lord, I have good news for you - not one of us is! And yet hundreds of millions of people over the last 2000 years or so have become Christians. How can this be, we may ask?

Because salvation is given to us as a free gift, and we can do nothing worthy of earning that salvation, we cannot boast about anything that we do or have done.

Ephesians 2: 10 (NLT)

¹⁰For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Wow! Look at this "God's masterpiece"? Ah, but He has created us anew in Christ Jesus!

When we receive the perfect gift of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we become a new creation with the capacity to do the good things that the Lord has planned for us!

Summary:

- We have all sinned.
 - We submit to the Lord or to the devil.
 - God is good, the devil is the enemy.
 - We inherited a sinful nature.
 - God's mercy withholds earned judgement.
 - God offers us eternal life with Him.
 - We can be saved by believing & confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.
 - We cannot earn or work for our salvation.
 - Jesus Christ makes us new and gives us eternal purpose and destiny.
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Before we go to the next slide, I want to remind you that prayer is conversation with the Lord. He knows what is going on in our hearts and circumstances and He really does want what is best for you and me - but He wants us to come to Him. We do this in prayer.

While no-one is ever going to force you to pray and commit your life to the Lord, today there is an opportunity for all of us to do so either for the first time, or to make a re-commitment to Him. So stand with me and let all of us who want to pray the prayer that is on the screen out loud together.

Jesus Christ, You Are my Perfect Gift, and I receive You now as my Lord and Saviour - I plan to live with You for eternity! Please will You forgive me for all of my sin - I am truly sorry for all of it and resolve today to live in obedience to You. Please will You teach me how to live in obedience to You, and how to fellowship with You, so as to fulfil the purpose that You had in mind when You formed me in my mother's womb. I want You to fill me up with Your Holy Spirit, my Comforter and Counsellor, so that I can walk in victory and truth forever. Amen.

If you have done this for the first time today, or have now made a re-commitment to the Lord, it is vital for you to get involved in a Church. Visit a few before you make a decision - see how the members relate to one another and to you, if it is in genuine love, you'll be pretty safe there. Jesus said that we should be known by our love.

The next thing is equally important: If you do not have a Bible in a contemporary version of your home language, I urge you to get a copy. In Afrikaans there is the Nuwe Lewende Vertaling which is very good. In English the New Living Translation is a very good version - there are study versions available too. Otherwise the New International Version or the New Century Version are both good. Stay away from the old King James version unless you enjoy its poetry, but don't try to study it... Then read it as much as you possibly can, asking the Holy Spirit to open it up to you every time that you do so.