

“Regenerative Power For A New You”

Grace, peace, and mercy are yours from our God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Is anyone familiar with the novel “The Modern Prometheus”? Actually, I think you are. It was written by Mary Shelley and it centers around a doctor obsessed with the possibility of extending life by regenerating dead human cells and tissues. In 1974 Mel Brooks and Gene Wilder put their spin on this novel in the movie “Young Frankenstein”. Although it’s a comedy, there’s a statement by Gene Wilder, who plays Doctor Frankenstein, that’s rather profoundly true. “From the very first day when filthy bits of slime crawled out of the sea and called to the stars ‘I am man’, our greatest dread has always been the knowledge of our mortality. But tonight, we will hurl the gauntlet of science into the frightful face of death itself. Tonight, we shall ascend into the heavens! We shall mock the earthquake! We shall command the thunders and **PENETRATE THE VERY WOMB OF IMPERVIOUS NATURE HERSELF!!!**”

The part that’s profoundly true is where Wilder says “our greatest dread has always been the knowledge of our mortality.” This dread, this fear has caused many to “hurl the gauntlet of science into the frightful face of death itself” in the hope that they can defeat death. Through cryogenics people are seeking ways to freeze bodies to await the day when diseases have been conquered and the frozen individual revived to live on. And transhumanism seeks technologies that will enhance the human body, with the ultimate aim being to transform a person so radically as to “overcome fundamental human limitations”, including death itself.

What these people don’t know is that this has already been accomplished. In the section of Ephesians we’re looking at today the apostle Paul declares that God has provided the solution to the cause of death and the finality of death. He’s not offering a Frankensteinian, Deep Freeze or transhumanist solution to the fact that our bodies will someday die. What he describes is a regenerative power for a new you, right now, and the assurance of a new you forever in the new heavens and earth God will bring at the glorious coming of His Son.

The truth is, we need this regenerative power *not so much* because our bodies will one day fail us but because, as Paul puts it, the reason we will physically die is because we are by nature spiritually dead. Paul put it this way **“you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.”** Ephesians 2:1-2 What Paul is referring to is the fact that we’ve inherited spiritual death and, if for no other reason than that, we need Jesus.

But when he goes on to say we were, **“following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience...[living] in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind,”** Ephesians 2:2-3 some of us might have trouble relating to his words. Many of us grew up in Christian homes and were taught from little on to trust Jesus. And, by God’s grace, many have been spared the entanglement of the really disastrous sins that flow out of our sinful natures.

That’s not to say we don’t personally know what sin is. All of us have been tempted; all of us have thought about and dwelt on and even dabbled in various immoralities. And all of us must admit that at the center of our being is a sinful nature that still likes its own way and is still capable of cruelty, expressions of anger and violence, rebellion and loveless exploitation of others. We recognize that we needed **“the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit”** Titus 3:5 that was given to us in our baptism.

But when Paul says, **“All of us lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts”** Ephesians 2:3 NIV we may be tempted to say “I know there are people like that but that’s not me. I’ve never lived like that.” And, for the most part, that may be true. We’ve sinned but not in “that” way. You know, the way that the really bad sinners sin, those who sin differently than we do.

And yet Paul, an enthusiastically committed Pharisee before Jesus called him, and a dedicated disciple and apostle of Jesus after, included himself when he wrote **“All of us.”** And if he is included in this truth, we certainly are, as well.

I think one of the reasons we have a hard time understanding this is because we don’t

begin to understand the depths of what sin is really like, what our nature looks like compared to the holiness of God. Like those we would say are “of the world” we too avoid or excuse the ugly truth of our sinful human nature. It’s all too easy to look at the troubled human situation and minimize it, to think, “Sure, I need Jesus. He gets it started. But then, by the strength He gives me I need to finish it off” – as if we could really do that!

But because Paul wrote, we “**were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.**” Ephesians 2:3 he’s saying this is universal human problem, no exceptions. And the fact that this problem brings God’s wrath, His righteous anger, is proof that this wasn’t God’s design or intention for us. God wouldn’t punish us for something He intended to happen. No, sin was and continues to be our wonderful contribution to the world. And it’s so deep that Jesus said that we need, not just reform or refurbishing, but rebirth, to be, as He told Nicodemus, born again. You need to become a new you. And I need to become a new me.

You know how sometimes when you are ready to take a person’s picture the person says, “Hold it. Let me turn so you get my better side.” It’s generally true. Almost all of us look better from one angle or another – and we don’t mind that, as long as our friends don’t tell us that we look best from behind or behind a closed door.

Well, God has two sides to His nature, too. I’ve even heard these referred to as “the two sides of His hand.” When the Bible speaks God’s judgment because of our sin it’s like seeing God’s hand raised as a threat to us, ready to strike us down. You can see the threat of God’s hand of punishment in statements like “**The soul that sins shall die!**” Ezekiel 18:20 And, since we all sin, we know that “our greatest dread”, our mortality is a certainty – we will die.

But in Jesus Christ God’s hand is and we see His “better side.” He couldn’t simply ignore sin, nor can He coexist with it. But God’s “better side” was seen when He sent His Son to live, die and rise again as our Savior. God did something about our sin – something only He could do. He redeemed us, purchased our freedom with His own life. And now His hand doesn’t threaten. Instead, His hand beckons and invites us to come to Him for forgiveness and life.

The very first word in verse 4 is the turning point. It's a small word that introduces God's regenerative power – "But". We were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. **"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."** Ephesians 2:4-5 And there are three key words here which explain how this can happen for us even though we were objects of wrath.

First, God is rich, filled with mercy. The Hebrew behind this word is the word *chesed*, also often translated steadfast kindness. And God's mercy is active. God doesn't just look on us with pity and say He's sorry for us. His mercy causes Him to reach out to accomplish what He desires. And what He desires is to love you and me, His broken creatures, whom He originally designed to be objects of His affection forever. And He does this not because we deserve it or earn it but because of His grace, a surprising gift from a merciful, loving Father.

It's these words that let us see that, because of Jesus, God's hands are inviting us, His arms are outstretched to welcome us, like a Good Shepherd reaching out to embrace and cradle a lost lamb. Actually Paul's picture is even more dramatic than that! He says, **"when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ!"**

In last Sunday's section of Ephesians Paul spoke of the incomparably great power of God that raised Jesus from death and exalted Him to the position of glory at the Father's right hand. Paul now extends that to us. And it is so certain that Paul writes about it in the past tense: **"[God] raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."** Ephesians 2:6-7 As far as God is concerned, all of that has already happened!

And to show us how complete and certain this is Paul emphasizes that God does it all. **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."** Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul writes in Romans: **"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."** Romans 10:17 God Himself

creates the faith which simply receives His grace, His undeserved gift of love. You can't earn it or pay for it in any way. Indeed, as soon as you think you can, it's no longer a gift.

And that's why all boasting is eliminated. We can't boast of something we had no part in achieving. And if boasting is eliminated, so is *uncertainty*. Think about that. If God's offer to you was 90% His grace and 10% your works, could you ever be sure you've contributed your percentage? A religion where our effort is necessary is always a religion either of self-righteous false pride or of gnawing uncertainty. But God will have none of either! Because it is grace and all from God we can be completely certain of our eternity with Him.

Paul concludes this section by reminding us that, since we are no longer dead in trespasses and sins, but alive in Christ, we're empowered to demonstrate our love for Him by loving others. Paul wrote: "**For we are** *his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*" Ephesians 2:10 The word workmanship refers to something that has been finely crafted and finished. God has done His best work in us and loves that which He has made. We are now able to do those things which God has made us for. And just as our salvation is completely God's doing, so are the good works He has prepared for us to do.

At the beginning of this *Letter to the Ephesians* Paul wrote of the wonder of God's predestining us to life in Christ even before the world was created. Here he adds to the wonder of it all by saying that God even prepared in advance the good works He has in mind for us to do. This means we don't have to run around looking for good works to do to impress God but that God will give us opportunities to bless others because this is how we've been made.

This is the regenerative power that's ours in Christ! God's not interested in producing some Frankensteinian kind of creature, and surely not to put you into a Deep Freeze. He's made you a completely new you! And He promises to give you opportunities which bring Him joy as you bless others so that they can know His love as well. Amen.