

We've had a very long cold winter this year haven't we? We've never used our central heating for as long as this year. Perhaps it's a sign of things to come – global colding rather than global warming!

You've probably all heard the joke which asks 'Why do all the birds fly south for the winter?' To which the reply is? 'Because it's too far for them to walk!'

There's a great verse in the chapter of Isaiah that we looked at a section of this morning – Isaiah 40 – which says, '*... those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not grow faint.*' Isaiah 40:31. A verse of comfort and hope for Christians. Of course it doesn't mean that Christians will grow wings and start flying around the place, but it **does** signify that they will go through higher experiences than non-Christians.

Someone said there's only three kinds of people in the world today, those who can count and those who can't.

There are in fact only **two** kinds of people in the world today, those who follow Christ, and those who don't.

I've given this evening's talk the title 'Grounded or soaring?', and I want us to look at the major differences between these two kinds of people - Christians and non-Christians, those with Christ and those without Christ, those in Christ and those outside of Christ.

Let's read from Paul's letter to the [Ephesian Christians, chapter 2, vs 1-10](#). [P.....]

Two different types of person – firstly man as he is by **nature**, what a man is like before he becomes a Christian; and secondly man as he is when changed by **God**, when he becomes a Christian. We're going to think about the bad news first, but please stay with me, there's some great news after that.

Imagine for a moment, an alien lands his space ship one day on Race Hill above Brighton. He beams himself out and meets an inhabitant of our city, and says 'show me the important parts of Brighton'. Well, of course the inhabitant thinks that Patcham would be a great place to start – nice people live there – (point to me!), and so they head off down Bear Road.

But within minutes they come to an area that catches the alien's attention. 'This seems like a nice place,' he says, in his Queen's English accent he learnt at alien school. 'So peaceful.' And our inhabitant has to agree, it **is** peaceful. Lovely green areas.

'You don't get any complaints from the people **here**,' the Brightonian says, 'everyone's content, no anti-social behaviour, no need for police here, **lovely** place to be. The only thing is, the people here don't even **know** they're here; strange, because lots of people are dying to **be** here. In fact that's the only requirement you have to **have**, you have to be **dead** – this is the cemetery!'

Paul is writing here to new Christians, and he says in this first verse, '*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*' These people, before they became Christians, were dead in their transgressions and sins. They were **dead**. Verse 3 says, '*All of us ...*' and '*Like the rest, we ...*' So Paul's saying that this is the natural human condition; anyone who isn't a Christian, is **still** dead in their transgressions and sins. They're dead. Not just sick, able to take a tablet to make them feel better; not just dying, because that would still imply they were alive. No, the Bible says that anyone who does not believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour is dead in their transgressions and sins.

'Just hang on a minute,' you say, 'all these people around us are very much alive and well, and the majority of them are happy and really enjoying their lives, thank you very much.' Yes, that's right – most people **are** living quite nicely. But like our bodies in Bear Road cemetery, these people don't **know** that they're dead; and the reason for that is that they are grounded. They're leading their earthly lives, and don't even **recognise** that there **is** a higher existence, a more important life, a spiritual life. A life that they know nothing about.

'*You were dead in transgressions and sins.*' This obviously doesn't have anything to do with physical life, but **spiritual** life. Because it has to do with transgressions and sins. Most people out there wouldn't even agree that they're bad people, that they've done anything wrong – they're better than others, they've committed no crimes, they look after their family, they give to charity, they've never done anyone any harm. But you see, people who think like this are grounded – their eyes are on this **earthly** life, the world around them and their part in it.

They have no idea that there even **is** a spiritual life, and no matter how physically fit they are – they can go to the gym every day – no matter how mentally agile they are – they can win Mastermind – no matter how charismatic and attractive their personality is – they can be on the front cover of every magazine in the country

the Bible says that they are dead in the area that ultimately matters **much** more than their whole earthly existence – their relationship with God their Creator is **dead**.

This is the condition of everyone before God draws you to himself. Dead in transgressions and sins. Biblical words, basically meaning the things you have done wrong, but also the **right** things you've **failed** to do. Twice guilty. Transgressions and sins.

Living down here in the prosperous south, bustling entertaining city life, very pleasant surroundings, the wonderful fresh sea air, the beautiful sunsets – it's easy to fail to see what the Bible is saying here – man is captive to *'the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.'* We feel we're free to do **whatever** we want to do, don't we? **We** decide what we want to do each day – that's freedom.

But, you see, that's the whole point that we're missing; we were created in God's **image**, in his likeness to live in relationship to God, and to live **without** God, making our **own** decisions, isn't going to give us freedom. When you see God's truth, Jesus says that truth will set you free. You may **feel** you're free, but the Bible says here that you're **not**, in fact you're a slave to sin – you do things you're addicted to, you feel you just have to, you can't stop doing them, you follow the ways of this world, you're being led away from God by the devil.

Before a person becomes a Christian he is ruled by his or her own sinful nature, *'gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts'* verse 3 says. If we take an honest look at ourselves, an **honest** look at ourselves, surely we soon have to recognise that we are self-centred people, everything revolves around **us**, doesn't it? If something's not of benefit to **us**, we find it very difficult to justify doing it at all, don't we?

But putting ourselves **first** must mean by definition that we put everyone else **below** us – look at the world, people being oppressed; materialism rules – I must have it, and have it **now**; racial discrimination – foreigners aren't as good as **us**; poverty – as long as **I'm** OK ... ; hunger – as long as **I** have enough to eat ... ; unemployment – **I've** got a job, I'm alright, Jack. I could go on – lifting myself up, presses others down. This is the way of the world.

Sometimes a river can seem so calm and tranquil; but underneath the surface there can be strong currents, and you try swimming in it and you just get swept along, you can't get out to either bank, you just get carried along – you can't stop yourself. We just get swept along – it's the way of the world.

The devil is real, don't ever doubt that. The Bible describes him as a deceiver; Jesus describes him as a liar, a murderer; Peter describes him as a lion prowling to see who he can devour. His role is to stop men and women enjoying a relationship with God. He's powerful, and his powers of argument are strong – promising freedom and pleasure are powerful bargaining tools. But don't be fooled, friends. His power is only short-lived, and the Bible says a day's coming when he will be defeated once and for all.

These verses in Ephesians tell it how it **really** is: before a person becomes a Christian, he's dead in transgressions and sins; and because he's not going God's way, he's open to powerful influences beyond his control, both from inside and out; he's totally at the mercy of the devil, who will lead him astray with temptations to sin, to go the way of the world. This is the freedom of the **world**, at the mercy of the deceptions of the devil. Such a person is grounded – drifting along in the ways the world which their own sinful nature and the devil forces him into.

And verse 4 tells us that this means that before we become a Christian, we are objects of wrath, objects of God's righteous anger, because he's angry with sin. He doesn't want **any** of us to go the way of the world, but this is rebellion against **him**, and so he is angry. We are by nature objects of wrath. And the Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death – like Derek was saying last Sunday, those who are not in relationship with God, have nothing to look forward to except the prospect of dying.

Not so pleasant a message so far, I'm afraid. But that's the bad news over with! Let's get onto the good news.

During the news coverage of the British Airways workers' strike recently, there were pictures taken from a helicopter of all the planes parked up and going nowhere at Heathrow. You **could** say 'What beautiful looking aircraft', and there's an aircraft museum at Duxford near Cambridge, where you can go and see Concorde, among others. But you see, that's **not** what these planes were **made** for. They weren't built just to parked up, grounded. They were made to fly through the air – to soar above the clouds.

The same with us. We weren't made just to be satisfied (or not) with our existence here in **this** life; we were made for much **more** than that. There's so much more for us to experience, if we come back to our creator, accept his love, and let him show us the life he wants us to lead, **truly fulfilling** lives.

Jesus said, *'I have come that they [those who follow him] that they may have life, and have it to the full.'* John 10:10.

The good news starts in our passage in verse 4, with the word *'But'*. And this is a great word here, because it tells us that all the bad news beforehand – that a person who doesn't know God is dead in transgressions and sins – that bad news doesn't have to **remain** true of that person. *'But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us **alive** with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.'*

What did God do? He made us alive with Christ – he's made us **alive** - with Christ. Isn't this great news? I hope you agree. God has saved us from all that we've been talking about up until now. We needn't just get swept along through life, just doing all the things we're **expected** to do by the world around us. We **no longer** need to be ruled by our self-centred, sinful nature. We no longer need to be powerless to resist the temptations of the devil. We no longer need to be dead in our transgressions and sins. Why? Because God has **saved** us, he has rescued us from those powers through **Jesus**.

When you become a Christian, when you accept this truth, *'... you have been saved.'* Past tense. You have been saved, once and for all. Nothing can change that – you have been saved. Permanente. Why can we know that this change is permanent? Because *'it is by grace you have been saved'*, *'it is by **grace** - you have been saved.'* When you become a Christian, it's nothing that **you** have done that changes things. **You** can't play any part in your salvation except to accept it.

At Christmas your Auntie Mabel gives you a large present all wrapped up very nicely and tied with a bow. You open it excitedly, and reveal something that you've always wanted. You don't then reach into your pocket and pull out a handful of money and ask 'How much do I owe you?' It's a **gift**. Likewise, *'it is by grace you have been saved'*, it's God's **gift**.

You see we can't save ourselves from being dead – those bodies in Bear Road cemetery can't bring themselves back to life – the dead can't save the dead. Only **God** could save us. Only God had the power to save us from our transgressions and sins, to save us from the power of evil. *'it is by grace you have been saved.'*

We said earlier that God is angry with our rebellion against him, we are by nature objects of God's wrath. There is no sin in him, and no sin can be in heaven. This is what has separated man from God, the Bible says. So he has to punish sin.

The wonderful news, the **amazing** news tonight is that God has **already** punished our sin, without punishing **us**.

There's a great verse in Psalm 103, which says, *'He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger for ever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.'* Psalm 103:9,10.

God has saved us from the punishment we deserve for our sins, by placing the punishment on his **Son**, Jesus. *'He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.'* Isaiah 53:5. In effect, God suffered the punishment inflicted by God. Jesus the Son of God suffered the full force of God the Father's anger, when he died on that cross, that first Good Friday. Jesus **died** to save us from the punishment for our sins.

This is the most wonderful message for the world. That because Jesus has died, those who believe in him have been **saved**. The most urgent need of men, women and children all over this world, is what Jesus said to a man who came to see him one night, Jesus said, *'You must be born again.'* John 3:7. *'You must be born again.'* This isn't just a sticking plaster put on an injury, this is radical **surgery**. You must become a new person. And the great news is that those who become Christians have been saved, and the Bible says that *'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!'* 2 Corinthians 5:17.

More than that, look at what verse 6 of our passage in Ephesians says: *'And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.'* Again past tense. These things are so certain, that Paul talks about them in the past tense, as though they have already happened.

On the cross, some of Jesus' last words were *'It is finished.'* When Jesus died, he did everything that was necessary for us to know forgiveness for our sins, and to be able to experience life to the full, **everlasting** life with God in heaven. Nothing else needs to be done, nothing can be added. God has saved us. And as Jesus rose again, Christians too will rise again. And as Jesus now sits in heaven, Christians too will one day live in heaven. *'It is finished.'* These things are **certain** for the Christian.

Well, we have to ask ourselves the question, *'Why did God **do** this for us? Why did God do this for **me**?' He didn't **have** to. Jesus didn't **have** to die for us. In punishing us for our sins, he would **still** have been acting justly – we **deserved** to be punished for our rebellion against God, rejecting him, going our own selfish way.*

'Why did God do this for you?' Was it because you've done some very kind things in your life? Was it because you're such a great person? Sorry to disappoint you, but **neither** of these things can bring you salvation.

No, it was '*because of his **great love** for [you]*', it says here. There's nothing in **us** to warrant God doing this for us. Jesus, the Son of God loved you, and gave himself for you. God doesn't want '*anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*' 2 Peter 3:9. He loves you; so much that he was prepared to send his only Son to die on a cross for you. God did this '*Because of his great love for [you]*'.

God is rich in mercy – he is full of mercy. Jesus came to seek and save the lost – this is mercy, love for the lost. We're told the story of the lost sheep in Matthew's gospel, that if a shepherd realises that one of his hundred sheep is lost, he will leave the ninety-nine to go and find it. Jesus in his mercy came to seek and save the lost.

Verse 7 tells us that there are incomparable riches in God's grace. The strength of his love for us is **incomparable**, **nothing** can compare with the strength of God's love for his people – he sent his only Son to die, so that we don't need to face judgement. But the strength of that love is **multiplied** because it is **undeserved**, it's by God's grace you have been saved. How could God love you like this? The answer is simple – because he is **God**, he is the only one who **could** love you like this.

Why did God make you alive in Christ? Because of his love, because of his mercy, because of his grace, because of his kindness.

We just need to round this off by saying that Christians have been made alive in Christ. They have been born again, they are new creations, the old has gone, the new has come, they are now in Christ. This is God's workmanship – it is all God's doing, he has saved us by grace, he has given us the faith to believe that Jesus is the only Way to God and heaven. He has done it all.

But Christians don't just **believe** in Jesus, they don't just **worship** him, they are **in Christ**. They are now inextricably linked to Jesus. They are in union with him. Nothing can separate them. And this is fundamental to Christianity. Ephesians chapter 1, verse 3 says, '*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing **in Christ.***' Past tense again. These things are certain for the Christian. God '*made us alive **with Christ** ... God raised us up **with Christ** and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in **Christ Jesus.***'

Paul puts it very succinctly in his letter to the Galatians, when he says, *'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.'* Galatians 2:20.

There are only two types of people: Without Jesus we are dead in our transgressions and sins, at the mercy of our selfish desires, the world around us and the devil – such people are grounded in this life;
'But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ – it is by grace you have been saved.' – these people are able to soar to the heights of the heavenly realms in Christ.

There are only two types of people – I know which type **I'd** like everyone here to be; I know which type **God** would like everyone here to be.

The question is, are you **convinced** of this truth?

Sing Wonderful grace/ Before the throne of God above