

The Riches Of His Grace

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- [0 : 00] Word this morning, in Christ's name, Amen. You can be seated, please. Good morning, everybody. On my internet browser, I use Safari, on my internet browser, I get a lot of those body transformation pop-up ads, which have the before and after photos.
- I don't know if you've seen those. They see things like, you know, a picture will come up, or two pictures, and they'll say things like, get ripped, lose weight now with this one weird trick, and they'll show somebody that sort of, you know, looks kind of unhappy, and in the next photo, they look kind of incredible.
- And they're photos of these transformed bodies, and I get a lot of these somehow when I'm searching the internet, and I'm pretty sure my computer is insulting me.
- The passage tonight is about transformation. This morning, sorry, is about transformation. But not superficial transformation. Not superficial change.
- It is about real life, death, change. Change that comes when God takes a hold of your life. Now, if you just slide your eyes over the passage pretty quickly there, I think that the structure is fairly obvious.
- [1 : 19] At the beginning, it talks about what you're saved from, and ends by talking about what you're saved to. And then the bit in the middle is about how that happens or why that happens.
- Let's begin with the first couple of verses there. What does it say you're saved from? What does that before photo look like of humanity? Well, it doesn't mess around, really.
- The first thing it says is that you're saved from death. Secondly, it says that you're saved from being just a follower. This is verse 2. A follower of the world.
- A follower of the prince. Of the power of the air. That following word is a slavery word. Before you were a Christian, you were dead, it's saying.
- And a slave. And then verse 3. You're called children of wrath. It means you're under God's judgment. So the before photo doesn't, it's fairly, it's pretty serious.
- [2 : 19] It says you're dead, enslaved, and condemned. Let's have a look at these ideas. Okay, what does it mean by dead? It's talking about a spiritual condition.
- Perhaps you've watched the show The Walking Dead. Anybody? Anybody? Very few nods. Okay. It's a show about the zombie apocalypse.
- Brought about by a virus. It's very popular. It's actually a bit of a, from what I can gather, I've done some reading on it, it's a bit of a guilty pleasure of some academics who like to study it as a parable of modern society.
- So the basic gist of it is you have this band of survivors. So this virus hits the world. People are turned into zombies. But you have this band of survivors trying to stay alive amongst their hordes of zombies.
- And the zombies in the show are called walkers. Now early in the series, some of the more startling or more emotionally charged scenes were when the living people would come across loved ones or people they worked with who were now zombies.

[3 : 33] And one of the unsettling things for these characters was seeing how death mimicked life. Because these people looked like their loved ones.

And they walked and they could see and they could hear, but they were actually dead. And I think this is not a bad picture of what Paul's talking about here. Because a spiritually dead person can be physically robust and intelligent and creative and generous.

But still spiritually dead. So death doesn't actually sound so bad. So what is Paul saying when he says somebody's spiritually dead? What are they actually talking about?

Well, goodness, there's a lot of things to say. But one of the implications of calling humanity without Christ dead is this. When you are dead, there is nothing you can do to make yourself not dead.

Paul is saying here, before you were a Christian, you were spiritually dead. And there was nothing you could do to make yourself alive to God. You couldn't make yourself believe his word, be responsive to his spirit.

[4 : 39] You couldn't make yourself a follower of Jesus. You couldn't do that stuff. You were not capable of doing that stuff. You had as much chance of making yourself into a Christian as a dead body has of making itself into a living person.

So the spiritually dead person who appears to be very alive can live a good life. But they're called dead because they can't make themselves a follower of God.

Moving on to the second description of humanity. In the Walking Dead TV show, if you want to attract zombies, so what they do is they'll go into a house to get food, and they want to make sure there's no zombies in there.

So they'll make lots of noise because the zombies can't help themselves. They're just drawn to noise. So they hear noise. They'll just start walking in zombie fashion towards a loud noise.

It's like a stimulus response. In our passage here, the dead are enslaved to three things. So the zombies are enslaved to noise. They can't help themselves. In our passage, the dead are enslaved to three things.

[5 : 43] It says the dead are enslaved to the world, the devil, and the flesh. What does it mean by the world? The world is a Greek-read cosmos.

It's society organized without God. So Paul is saying here that people are captive, that people are enslaved to the values of whatever society they find themselves in.

People will often say that that's not the case, that that's not really true. They're their own person. But just think about something like fashion, for example. Imagine purposely wearing something incredibly unfashionable.

Think about perhaps the suit. If you're a man, the suit you got married in, and maybe you're at the 70s or something like that. Think about walking around the street in that suit. Or something from, I'm trying to think of a really uncool decade.

But I'm going to offend somebody if I particularly pick up. I know I will, so I'll stay out of it. But as a mental experiment, I did this once. I wore terrible clothes in a previous decade.

[6 : 48] And I felt so awkward walking around. It sort of made me realize how bound I am to something like that. So if we're so bound to something like fashion, what makes us think we're going to be any less bound by society's morals or values or ideals?

Ambitions. When a person says, I don't want to be a Christian because I want to be free to do whatever I want, I mean, it's just a nonsense, isn't it? If you're not following Christ, you're following something.

And most likely your social context will be the most significant thing shaping you. So the spiritually dead are enslaved to the world, number one. Very quickly, the devil.

They're enslaved to the devil. That's what the prince of the power of the air is. The plain teaching of the Bible is that there is an unseen world. It's ruled by the devil. He has charge over demonic beings.

Satan hates you. He has influence in the world. I hope you believe in Satan. I hope you take this aspect of Christianity seriously. I'd like to talk about this more, but we actually don't have time, so I'm going to move on.

[7 : 55] So we're enslaved to the devil. We're enslaved to the world. And if you're not a Christian, you're also enslaved to the flesh. We're captive to our flesh. Flesh here is not muscles and skin.

It's self-centered human nature. Let me explain it like this. It's like there's this little computer in your heart, and it's analyzing every situation, and it's calculating, how does this situation serve me?

See, when God is not the center of our hearts, something is, and it's us. We place ourselves in the center of our lives. So, of course, we want what's best for us.

Now, that kind of attitude can make people a narcissist. It can make people crazy. It can make people evil. It can make people very unpleasant.

But you know one of the really attractive ways of being self-centered is by being incredibly good. And you can be very nice, and you can help lots of people.

[8 : 57] And you can be doing it all for your own sake. And what you're doing is you're trying to create a life, a meaningful life. You're trying to create a purposeful life without God.

If you haven't seen the original Rocky movie, you really should. It's fantastic. In 1976, won Oscar for Best Film, I believe.

Sylvester Stallone wrote it. He tried to get it. He actually pushed through the whole movie getting made, but they wanted a big star to star in it. But I'm glad he demanded that he was the star in the show.

He's fantastic in it. It's a great movie. It's the story of a down-on-his-luck boxer who gets a chance to fight the world champion. It's a million-to-one shot. There's this great scene with his Adrian.

Adrian! Adrian, his girlfriend. And he explains why he's doing it, because everyone thinks he's just going to be killed in the ring, because he's just this down-on-the-luck guy, the local boy, fighting the world champion called Apollo Creed.

[10 : 03] And there's this great scene. He's explaining to his girlfriend why he's doing this when everyone thinks he's just going to embarrass himself. Here's what he says. He goes, All I want to do is go the distance. Nobody's ever gone the distance with Creed.

And if I could go the distance, you see, and that bell rings, and I'm still standing, I'm going to know for the first time in my life, see, that I weren't just another bum from the neighborhood.

This is what self-centeredness looks like when it's kind of dressed up a bit. You know, I feel insecure. I don't want to feel like this.

So I will do good. I'll do something good. I'll do something spectacular. I'll prove to people I'm a good person. I'll show them. And you can. You can become a spectacular person, but it's all still self-serving.

And it all can still be slavery to the flesh. So summary so far. Paul says, Without Christ, humanity is spiritually dead, unable to help themselves, followers of the world, the devil, and the flesh.

[11 : 10] And because of that, it says in verse 3, We're children of wrath, which means that we are condemned. The idea of God, God's anger, it's not nice to talk about, and people can reject this as a characteristic of God because they feel like it's below God to be angry.

But that's, we can only think that when we're looking at it through the lens of our own anger. And when I think about my own anger, I think about myself losing my temper.

I think about myself operating out of spite or malice or flying off the handle when my kids do something stupid. That's what my anger looks like, and I sort of project that onto God.

But God doesn't fly off the handle, and he doesn't operate out of spite or malice. He doesn't lose his temper. He is eternally hostile toward evil because he is a holy and just God.

He is opposed to sin because it blackens, it ruins his good creation. So when we sin, we bring ourselves under the judgment of God.

[12 : 25] So that's the before photo. This is Paul's assessment of humanity, and it's brutal, and it's truthful. This is, of course, not the whole truth about mankind.

We are also made in the image of God. We still retain that. We have innate dignity and beauty because of this. This image has been damaged, and we can't fix ourselves. So we are dead, slaves, condemned.

This is what the Bible says about us before Christ. I hope you believe this. This is not the thing we can afford to be naive about.

Because if you are naive or superficial in your assessment of humanity, we will look for superficial remedies. And these remedies can be things like, well, all humanity needs is to be better educated.

Or we just need better legislation. Or we need a better economy. Or we need to just pay it forward. Something like that. No, there is only one solution.

[13 : 38] And that's in the next section. All right, that's the before photo. Now the after photo. The after photo begins in verse 4 with two amazing words. Some people say the best words in the Bible.

So the context is dead, slave, condemned, verse 4, but God. But God. But God.

But God acted. And why did he act? Because of his mercy and love in verse 4. Because of his grace in verse 5. Because of his kindness in verse 7. That kindness, that is costly love. God acted.

And what did he do? Verse 5 and 6. Let me read it to you. Verse 5. He made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. And raised up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

So three big verbs there, right? You can see them. God has what? One, made us alive. Two, raised us up. Three, made us sit. Those should sound familiar to you, those kind of verbs there.

[14 : 44] They all relate to Christ. They all relate to what Christ did. He was raised from the dead. He ascended to heaven. And he seated at the right hand of God. So the passage is saying we are connected to those things.

We are in Christ somehow in these events. So what it's saying is just wild. Somehow we're in Christ. In some mysterious way.

In Christ. Sharing in his resurrection. Sharing in his ascension. Sharing in his session. Which is him being seated with God the Father. And what does it all mean?

It means a million things. Let me just pick two. First, we're not seated with Jesus literally in heaven.

But we are there legally in God's eyes. Which means that God accepts us like his own son. Which is a great thing to remember if you're weighed down by guilt or shame at the moment.

[15 : 46] Secondly, whatever this means that we're in Christ in his resurrection, ascension, in session, it means that there's power to live differently. You're alive to God. You're sensitive to God. You open the Bible and you believe it.

that didn't exist before. Something has happened. Something has changed. Now that you're in Christ. Paul who wrote Ephesians completes this after picture with this wonderful word in verse 10.

He says, For we are his workmanship. That's such a great word. We are his workmanship. Created in Christ Jesus for good works which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

So we're once we're dead, enslaved, condemned. Now how are we described in the Bible? God's workmanship.

That's a beautiful word. It's poema. It's a creating word. It's where we get the English word poem from. So it's not like God saves us and just puts up with us.

[16 : 53] It's like we're saying we're God's work of art. We're God's masterpiece. And we're supposed to walk in that. And in talking about this walking right at the end of verse 10 there we should walk in that.

He takes us right back to the start, doesn't he? Because at the start he says, we're just walking in the ways of the world, the devil and the flesh and now we're walking in the works that God has for us as his wonderful creations.

Let me finish here. Paul, in a damning description of humanity says that we're dead, slaves and condemned.

But because of God's gift we're alive in Christ, a creation that God continues to work on. So, we're finishing up 2014 shortly. We're beginning 2015. What a wonderful reminder for us.

because this year you will feel the tug of the flesh, you will hear the lies of the devil, you will be tempted by the empty promises of the world.

[18 : 02] Folks, what I want you to do as we begin this year is remember you used to be owned by these things. You were owned by these things. But, that is not who you are now.

You are in Christ. Amen.