

Living the Trinitarian Life 10/17/10

By Michael Morrison

I've got a problem.

Actually, I've got two problems.

They are kind of personal problems, so I hope you don't mind me mentioning them.

But you are probably already familiar with them, because you have the same two problems.

The first problem is sin, and the second is death.

“Sin” is generally considered a *religious* word; it might be defined as “doing something that God doesn't like.” But, even if we take God out of the picture, we still have a problem, because we do things that we don't like. We don't like lying, cheating and stealing, and yet, sometimes we *do* things like that. We sometimes say things to our friends that we wish we hadn't.

Well, nobody's perfect — and that's my point. We all do things that we wish we hadn't. We have a *problem* with the way we live. We all want good interpersonal relationships, but all of us sometimes do things that hurt other people's feelings.

Sometimes we do it innocently, sometimes we do it because we're angry, sometimes we do it to their face and sometimes we do it behind their back. We say things about somebody that we wouldn't have said if they were there in person, and other people say things about us that they wouldn't say to our face, and it hurts.

So, whether you call it sin or something else, we've got problems with the way we live. We are not as good as we would like to be.

Now, our second problem is that we are going to die. Our imperfect life is gonna come to an end — and most people try to put that off as long as possible. Life has its ups and downs, and we'd really like to experience a few more “ups”. Sure, life has some unpleasant moments, but it also has some really good ones, and most of us would like to figure out a way to get more of those good moments, and figure out a way that they don't have to stop.

So our basic problems are, the way we live, and the way we die. That pretty much sums up what life is.

Now, people have been working on these problems for thousands of years, and basically, the nature of the problems has not changed, and I for one do not think that people are going to solve these problems. So I can really identify with the apostle Paul. In **Romans**

7, he describes his struggle with doing bad stuff even when he wants to do good, and after going on and on about this struggle he finally exclaims, “O wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Well, who indeed? Paul says that *Christ* will rescue him—and maybe he’s right. Maybe I need to bring God back into the picture. I sure know that I can’t fix my problems by myself. I can’t rescue myself from death, and I can’t even rescue myself from the wrong inclinations that are inside of me.

Most religions just throw people back on their own strength. Just work harder, they say. Do this, do that, and do it for a really long time, and you might be OK.

Well, I’ve got a problem with that approach.

It doesn’t work. First, I don’t “do it” very well, and after that, I am still going to die. I still have the same two problems. I need something that helps me *in this life*, and helps me in the *next* life.

And the Bible says that we are rescued by God from both of these problems. He sent Jesus 1) to rescue us from death, and 2) he sends the Holy Spirit to rescue us from the evil within. He helps us live in a better way, and he assures us that we will live forever.

Now, since we’ve all got these same two problems, and the Bible describes a solution to these two problems, I suggest that we take a look at what it says.

So today, let’s look together at what Paul wrote in **Ephesians chapter 2, starting in verse 1**. In this letter, Paul has been talking about how God raised Jesus from the dead and gave him a place of power in the heavens – power over everything else. This is the kind of power that God uses for us. Paul sees a parallel between what God did for Jesus Christ, and what he is doing in *us*, in our lives. And in **chapter 2**, he starts to focus on what God is doing inside of us. Let’s notice what he says in **verses 1 and 2**:

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live... when you followed the ways of this world...

That’s an interesting combination of words – they were dead when they used to live. Obviously, Paul is using the word “dead” here as a metaphor. The people were not dead in the sense that their heart had stopped beating and their brains had stopped functioning. But Paul says that they were dead in their behavior, in the way that they were doing stuff that God says is not part of an authentic life.

God wants us to be alive, not dead. The purpose of life is *to live* – to live *as life is defined by God*. He is offering us *life* rather than death— but life means a lot more than a heartbeat and a brain wave. God is not just offering us a biochemical existence—he has created us for much more than that.

Think of a **steer**, for example – its life is not much more than eating grass, eliminating waste, gaining weight, and eventually ending up in the slaughterhouse. Or think of a fish– its life is not much more than looking for food, looking out for predators, gaining weight, and eventually being eaten by something or another.

Human life should be more than that, because God *made us* for something more than that. The Bible tells us that God made humans in *his own image*; we have been made to be a bit like God. God wants us to have a life that is somewhat like *his* life. He wants us to *share* in that life; he wants to share that life with us.

And what is God's life like? What was God's life like before he created us? What was his life like before he created the universe? What was God's life like before he created anything at all?

What was it like when God was all that there was?

The insight of Christianity is that there is only one God—there is an ultimate unity to the entire universe—but this one God is complex rather than simplistic. God is one *being*, but God is three *persons* in one being. These three persons are called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and there is a fundamental unity to the three persons.

And how did this triune God live?

God lived in love. There was love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They loved each other. The Bible tells us that God is love, that this is his most basic characteristic. But if God were only one person, he could not be love, because love is defined as care and concern for something *other* than self, and before the creation, there was nothing *other* than God. But since God is three persons within an overall unity, there can be love *within* God, and indeed, there is. The Trinitarian life is one of *love*.

This is the nature of God's life, the nature of the life that he wants to share with us. So the life that he wants *us* to have is not just a biochemical existence – he wants us to have a life that is characterized by love – a life of joy and kindness and appreciation.

The title of my message is “The Trinitarian Life,” but it's not just about God – it is about the life that he wants us to have, too. God want *us* to have the Trinitarian life, and the Bible says that the Father is in us, the Son is in us, and the Holy Spirit is in us, bringing that kind of life to us, transforming the way we live now, and transforming our future life, as well.

I wish he would do it all a lot faster than he does, but I have to admit that he knows a whole lot more about it than I do, so I need to be patient with the way it works. Yes, patience is one of the things I need to have.

Now, back in **Ephesians 2** – Paul says that living people were actually dead in the way that they were living. They were living in a selfish way, and not experiencing life the way that God meant it to be, and they didn't have life according to the way that God defines

it, and that is why Paul calls the people “dead” in their transgressions and sins. They were falling short of the life God wants for his people, and they were on a path to death.

Their so-called life wasn’t much more than eating and drinking and then dying, like a cow or a fish. As Paul says, they were following the ways of the world, living pretty much like everybody else around them. We’ve all been there, and done that, and sometimes we do it again.

And if we look around at the world, we see the strong exploiting the weak; we see violence, we see misery, we see drudgery; we see people thinking, “There’s got to be more to life than this,” and other people are thinking, There *is nothing* more to life than this. And some will tell you that human life is no better than animal life, and some people even end up living pretty much like animals.

Some people live like plant-eaters, and some live like predators, and if humans are no better than animals, there’s really no reason to say that one lifestyle is better than the other. If we are just another animal, we really can’t say that it’s wrong to be like a shark, or a weasel, or a crocodile.

But the Bible says, No, we are not an animal. There is more to life than that. We are not supposed to pattern our life after an animal – we are made in the image of God, and we are supposed to pattern our life after the God who has *love* as his central characteristic.

But, we can’t do that on our own – we need *God to live in us*, and that’s what the Holy Spirit does. He brings the Trinitarian life, the divine life, the life of love and kindness, into us, and this is what Paul calls real life, the life that will make eternity so enjoyable.

You know, there’s a lot more to eternal life than just living forever and ever. We don’t just need to escape death and live longer and longer – we also need *a change in the way we live*, and that’s one of the reasons that Jesus is really good news, because he gives us both.

Paul says that if we just do what everybody else is doing, if we just go along with the crowd, then we are dead. The people in Ephesus had been like that. And it’s not just that they were following other people – Paul says in verse 2 that they were also following the ways **of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.**

So this is not just a human problem – there is some spiritual power at work *in* humanity. Paul doesn’t say much about it right here. In other places he writes that we are enslaved by sin, as if sin itself is an alien power that can hold us captive, that can *hijack* our minds, that can trick us into doing what it wants.

And that’s why, even if we can figure out that *love* is a better way to live than selfishness is, that’s why we just can’t do it on our own. We might do it right part of the time, but we can’t do it all the time. We are up against some alien spiritual power. Just exactly what it is and how it works, doesn’t matter right now, because Christ gives us power over it.

But Paul says that this alien spirit is still working in the people who are disobedient.

Verse 3: All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

We were once part of the disobedient group, with a basically selfish life, just doing whatever we wanted to do. And on our own, by nature, we were “objects of wrath.”

Literally, it says we were “children of wrath,” and I’m not sure what that means. If it were here by itself, I might think that “wrath” means that God was angry at us. But that interpretation doesn’t work, because the very next verse says that God is *not* angry at us. Maybe he has a *right* to be angry at us, and if he were like *us*, he *would* be angry at us, but the fact is that God doesn’t want to punish us—what he *wants*, is to rescue us from the problems of sin and death.

Verses 4 and 5: But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

God made us for a particular purpose, and he is not going to give up on that. He is going to rescue us from both forms of death. He is going to rescue us from the deadly way that we live, and from death itself. Sin leads to death, and if God fixes one of those problems, the other will be fixed as well. The two go together; they are just different sides of the same coin.

But the rescue operation does not come from anger, or from threats of punishment if we don’t measure up — it comes only through love, mercy, and grace. That’s because *that* is the sort of life that God has, and it’s the sort of life that he wants to share with us. It *has* to be done with mercy and grace because that is the nature of the Trinitarian life, not only of God, but also the life that he wants us to have. And you can’t get love as a result if you are sowing the seeds of anger and vengeance.

This is the unique message of the gospel: *God has done this for us*, he saved us by his grace, even when we were dead in our transgressions. Even when we were hopelessly ensnared in the wrong way of life, God made us alive with Christ. It was certainly not what we deserved — it was a *gift* — that’s what “grace” means.

And Paul puts this *in the past tense* — God has already made us alive. He has given us a new life, a life that is now defined by Jesus Christ rather than by the desires of the flesh or ways of this world.

As it says in Colossians, our lives are now *hidden* in Christ. And that word “hidden” is a helpful one, because we don’t always *see* ourselves in this new life. Sometimes we see the old life, still living selfishly, but the gospel tells us that the new life is in us, too.

God has made us alive with Christ. God's Spirit lives within us, allowing us to share in and participate in the Trinitarian life, the love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share with each other and want to share with us as well. God is already doing it in us, communicating it to us, building it in us.

But he has done more than that – verse 6 tells us

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

Notice again that this is in the *past* tense. God has already raised us up, given us a new life instead of our old dead one, and placed us with Christ. As his gift to us, God has already united us to Christ, even before we were aware of it, and we are seated with Christ, on a throne, in the heavenly places, even before we were aware of it.

Now, we usually think about heaven as being “up,” but it’s not really “up” at all. Heaven is simply where God is, and God is omnipresent – he is everywhere all at once. God is *here*, just as much as he is in the sky, just as much, or maybe even *more*, than he is in outer space. Some people have compared it to another dimension – a dimension that we cannot see but is nevertheless all around us.

No matter how we might describe it, Paul's point is that we are already living with Christ, already sharing in his life and his privileges. Salvation means not just a rescue from death, not just a favorable verdict on some future day of judgment, but it also affects our lives *right now*. We are already with Christ, and he is with us, and our lives should reflect that.

Verse 7 tells us why God did this: **in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.** We will be a permanent testimony to God's generosity – and I think that we will also be the continuing *recipients* of his generosity. He will *continue* to be gracious toward us in the coming ages, because that's the sort of being that he is, and he couldn't do that in the future, unless he gives us the grace we need now, for us to even be *alive* in coming ages.

The same kindness that he has already shown us in Jesus Christ, will continue to be shown to us in coming ages. That's because God doesn't change. He is love and he will continue to be love. He is merciful and will continue to be merciful. He is generous and will continue to be generous. What we have seen in Jesus is exactly what God is, and God will continue to be like that for all eternity.

Verses 8 and 9: **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—9 not by works, so that no one can boast.**

God has saved us as a gift; it is not something that we could earn or deserve. We could never be good enough on our own to earn the right to live with God forever. Of

ourselves, we don't have the right way of life, and we don't have the right *length* of life. It's those same two problems. But God has done it, as a gift, and we receive it by faith, simply by accepting it and believing it.

God does not force himself on us. We don't *have* to live in the way of love if we don't want to. Love, by its very nature, cannot be forced on anybody. God tells us it's *available*, and he is available, and he's willing to live in us and help us, but it doesn't do us any good unless we believe it, unless we want it. It's waiting there for us, if we accept it, but the gospel is an announcement that it's there. The deed has been done, the sins have been paid for and forgiven, the Holy Spirit is already here, and God offers us his life — but he doesn't force it on us. We need to respond.

But even if we respond in faith, we can't brag about that as if *we* have somehow done something special. Faith is also a gift of God. He makes faith available to us, but he doesn't force us to use it. We *can*, if we want to, if we are tired of the pointless old life that everybody else has.

If we are tired of living in the ways of death, we can have life, the way of true life, the way that God intended, the life that comes from the Father, through the Son and the Holy Spirit.

If we are going to live forever, then we need to live in such a way that it will be enjoyable for everyone forever, and the only way that's going to happen is if we love one another.

I'm not talking about some kind of syrupy romance. Our culture uses the word "love" quite a bit, but they often don't mean what they are saying. They are talking about lust, or a temporary fascination. When the Bible talks about love, it's talking about a self-sacrificial generosity, a love that is shown to us most clearly by Jesus, by what *he* did in his life and in his death.

Biblical love is not just being nice to the people we like, or to the people who like us — it is being nice even to the people who don't like us — it is a willingness to help even our enemies.

Now, this is countercultural, and people who live like this are sometimes taken advantage of, sometimes abused, sometimes killed. So in order to continue in the way of love, even in the face of a threat of death, we need some sort of assurance that there is life beyond death. We need some assurance that life is more than what we can see.

For illustration, let's suppose that we are all stranded in the desert with one gallon of water. If we share the water, it's not going to be enough for anybody—we will all die of dehydration. But if I steal the water and take it all for myself, it will be enough for me to get out of the desert and save my life. Everybody else will die, but I will live. So I am faced with a choice: either I do something evil, or I die.

Is there *anything* that can motivate me to do what is right, even if it means that I'm going to die?

Well, life after death could make a difference. If I had some evidence that I was going to live again, then perhaps I might be willing to do the right thing in *this* life. If I had longer-range vision, then maybe I'd have more motive for doing what's right. Maybe it would help if I had evidence that death had been conquered – if somebody actually came back from the dead and had a life that surpassed the kind of life that we know about.

And that, of course, is what we have in Jesus Christ. *But it doesn't do us any good unless we believe it.* We have to believe that it happened, and that it has some relevance to us today.

Now, even if we are on the right path, and headed in the right direction, we are going to make some mistakes. So, we need some sort of assurance that our mistakes do not *disqualify* us from the hope that we are aiming for. And of course, Jesus *gives* us that assurance, that forgiveness is continually available, because he has already paid for *all* our sins.

So we need assurance that the twin problems of sin and death have been taken care of, and that's what the gospel does. But God doesn't force this solution on us, and it doesn't do us any good unless we believe it, unless we accept the gift that he has given us.

So the plan that began with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is *implemented* by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father sent the Son to conquer death on our behalf, so that we can be raised with him to new life. And he sends the Holy Spirit to live within us to combat the sinful tendencies that are still inside us. So he tackles the problems of sin and death.

Verse 10 tells us *why* God does this:

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

He saves us by grace because *we are his workmanship* – that is, he created us – and he is not going to let his creation go to waste. He is going to rescue what he has made.

And as we learn elsewhere, none of this caught God by surprise. He knew all along that this was going to happen, and he knew ahead of time *how* he was going to fix it. He knew how much it was going to cost him, and he decided ahead of time that he was going to pay it.

Why? Because he was motivated by love. He wanted to create *life*, life like himself, a life that is characterized by love – love that leads to good works. God wants us to do good works not as an end in themselves, not as the ultimate purpose of life, and certainly not as payment for salvation, but simply because “good works” is *a description of what that life will look like.*

There is no contradiction between grace and good works. Paul includes them both here in the space of three verses. He says we were created for good works, but we cannot be saved *by* good works. Good works are the *result* and the *purpose*, but not the cause of salvation.

Actually, good works are the reason that we *need* salvation by grace. We were created to do good works, but we fall short of the purpose for which we have been created. Our own works do not earn us salvation – indeed, our works include works of sin, works of death, works for which we need to be forgiven, and from which we need to be rescued.

But the plan of salvation does not mean that God has abandoned his original goal for us. He still wants us to have a life of love, a life of good works, and he is working *in* our lives to bring that about. So he forgives our sins, and gives us grace, and he *continues* to give us grace. He assures us that he will give us grace *all the way into eternal life*, and he assures us that he lives within us, so that our lives can be energized by the Holy Spirit to do the good works which God has prepared for us to do.

But God does not force this on us. He tells us that this is what life is for – and indeed, a little thought will tell us that eternal life would not be very good unless it were something like this, characterized by love rather than selfishness, characterized by good works instead of bad ones. This is what God has prepared for us, that we might share in the life of God, the Trinitarian life, the **love** that is shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God has given this life to us as a gift, but he has also given us *the power to choose*. We can choose this life, or we can put it off. We can accept what he gives, or we can figuratively put it on the shelf without using it at all.

Most of us have already accepted the gift, and have begun to let it work in our lives. We still have the twin problems of sin and death, but we are also confident that Christ has overcome both of those problems, and we are promised that he is working in us, and he says that we will have an eternity in which we are freed from both problems.

Others in the audience have yet to make that decision, and if that's you, I'd like to take this opportunity to encourage you to accept what God has given. It's like God said through Moses long ago: I set before you life and death. So *choose life*, that it may go well with you, and with your children.

If you are dead in trespasses and sins, and would like to be raised up with Jesus Christ to a new life, a life in which God shares his life with you, a life characterized by love for others, then I encourage you to say "yes" to God, and I encourage you to tell somebody else about it.

I also encourage you to be baptized to symbolize this transition in your life. The Bible says that baptism symbolizes the death of your old self, and it symbolizes a *new life* for you, a life that's been brought into the sphere of the Trinitarian life, a life in which *love* prevails, not only in this life but also into an eternity with God.

Jesus Christ has conquered both sin and death, and as our Savior, he offers us love and life – not only his love for us, but also his kind of love *living in us*, transforming us, fashioning us for the purpose for which we were created in the first place: a life that is good, and a life that that we can enjoy forever.

I'm Michael Morrison, and that's a word from our Sponsor.